

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE FOREST OF DANGERS





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
FOREST OF DANGERS**

Jupiter, Pete and Bob travel to Montana to join a group hiking tour in the Rocky Mountains. Even before the hike starts, an accident happens, taking out one member of the group. Then in the forest, the group face one dangerous situation after another, including a bear attack. Very soon, the three boys are separated, each having to face different obstacles. It seems that someone is making efforts to stop the hike from continuing. The Three Investigators suspect that there is some sort of secret hidden in the forest of dangers, waiting to be uncovered.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Forest of Dangers

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1. 'Welcome to Two Creeks'

"Bob's Travel Diary, Montana, 30th May.

"Mountains, forests, lakes and a new breathtaking view around every bend—this is how the state of Montana has presented itself to us since we left Interstate 90 two hours ago. The Three Investigators are finally on the road again.

"It's actually Pete's trip. His grandpa wanted to take him on a hike in the mountains of Montana after he had liked the area so much on our driving trip through several states a few years back. However, his grandpa recently broke his toe. So now Jupe and I are along for the ride. Jupe was only moderately enthusiastic because since our last backpacking trip, he knows how exhausting it can be. However, I'm looking forward to it—four days of guided hiking in a small group far away from civilization. That will be great.

"This morning Pete's dad drove us to Los Angeles airport, from where we flew to Billings, Montana and picked up our rental car. Since then, Pete has been at the wheel, driving a bit breakneck up and down the switchbacks. At six o'clock, we are expected in a small town called Two Creeks. Jupe is asleep. How can he be with these curves? I feel a little dizzy as it is..."

"Say, what are you muttering to yourself?" Pete Crenshaw gave his friend Bob Andrews a questioning look through the rear-view mirror.

"Oh, I thought you couldn't even hear me, the way you were racing," Bob replied.

"I don't race. I merely drive in a sporty way. So who are you talking to?"

"My travel diary."

"You can talk to that? I thought that's what you write in."

"I didn't want to lug the book around so I dictate into my mobile phone. Maybe I'll transcribe it down at home and—"

"Wow, look at that!" cried Pete, startling Jupiter out of his sleep.

They had reached the top of the pass and the Second Investigator was steering the car straight between two towering boulders that formed the mountain peak.

The last fifteen minutes had been a steady climb and the view to the north had been blocked by high rock faces. Now a breathtaking panorama spread out in front of them. Behind an abruptly sloping rockfall was a wide green valley. On the other side, the forest stretched and climbed up the slope until the trees could no longer find a foothold and capitulated to the steep rock faces. Behind them were endless mountain ranges. Snow lay on the highest peaks. Here and there, fields of clouds hung tight and played with the sunlight. In the far distance, it was even raining.

Nowhere was a house to be seen. Nature seemed almost untouched—only the narrow road wound its way out of the woods here and there.

"The endless expanses of Montana," Bob said devoutly.

"Nobody really lives here, do they?" Pete was fascinated by the deserted landscape around him. "There's nothing like this on the coast of California. There we always see a house or a car or a power pole jutting out somewhere."

“That’s not correct, of course,” Jupiter lectured the Second Investigator, “but Montana is indeed one of the most sparsely populated states. With only about three people per square kilometre, it ranks—”

“Okay, okay, I don’t need such details,” Pete waved it off. He knew it was better to interrupt Jupiter as early as possible if he did not want to hear a long-winded lecture on a completely uninteresting subject. “Besides, I take it all back. There’s a car coming.”

From behind, a Buick convertible approached, and rather quickly. At the wheel was a man with dark hair, sunglasses and fingerless leather gloves. In a risky manoeuvre, he overtook the boys’ car just before a bend and sped away.

Shaking his head, Pete looked at the speeding car racing ahead. “Dangerous driver!”

From now on, it was all downhill. Ten minutes after the road entered the wooded valley, they were greeted by a large sign with the words ‘Welcome to Two Creeks’. Below it was painted a bear standing on a mountainside between two creeks.

Two Creeks consisted of little more than a road with a petrol station and a small diner, in front of which only SUVs and pick-up trucks were parked. Two bearded men in stained overalls and cowboy hats on their heads looked blankly at the boys’ white rental car. Three hundred metres after the town entrance sign came the exit sign.

“This can’t be right,” Pete muttered. “The Green House where we are supposed to meet Ralph and the others is in Two Creeks. We must have missed a turn.” He turned the car around in the middle of the road and drove back.

“We should ask someone,” Bob suggested.

On the verandah of a small grey wooden house not far from the diner, an elderly man sat on a worn kitchen chair. His hands were resting on the knob of a walking stick, and his baseball cap was pulled down low on his face.

Pete pulled over. “Ask him,” he told Jupiter.

The First Investigator rolled down the window. “Excuse me, sir, do you know the Green House?”

The man pushed his cap a bit out of his face and eyed the three boys. “You’re in the wrong place. There is no Green House here.”

The verandah door was pushed open and a stout woman in rubber boots stepped out. Her hands were in gardening gloves. “What are you talking about, Bill Greyfield? Of course there’s a Green House here.”

“Stay out of this, Karen,” the man growled angrily.

“Are you now going to suspect these innocent boys as well? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Innocent boys, ha! Nobody who throws their rubbish around in the mountains and builds game traps is innocent!”

“I’m sure these youngsters are up to no such thing, aren’t they?” Karen turned to The Three Investigators and gave them a smile.

“What do you know! You’re going to meet Ralph Sanders, aren’t you?”

“Er, yes,” Jupiter confirmed. “Mr Sanders is our hiking guide and—”

“I can tell you what Mr Sanders is! A criminal!”

2. Round of Introductions

“Get a grip on yourself, Bill Greyfield! A deer ran into Ralph’s car, not the other way around. That doesn’t make him a criminal.”

“Likely story. I don’t believe a word he says. He is a poacher. It’s been three weeks since the winter season ended—three weeks since Ralph started offering his hiking tours again—and wildlife traps are promptly built on Capricorn Peak. Look here!” Accusingly, he stretched his left foot which was in some kind of support shoe. “I broke my ankle falling into a hole like that. For hours I had to limp back to Two Creeks in pain. It could only have been Ralph, or one of his so-called nature friends—brats like you.”

“I can assure you that we have no intention of building animal traps, sir,” Jupiter said as politely as possible.

Karen shook her head apologetically. “Bill doesn’t mean it.”

“Bill very much means it,” the man countered.

“That’s enough now. You said yourself that it was just a hole—not a real trap at all. It was probably nothing more than a rabbit hole.”

“Rubbish, Karen! I was a ranger for forty years. I know what a rabbit hole looks like.”

“Excuse me, but if you could maybe just give us directions to the Green House—”

“Besides, your ankle is only sprained,” Karen continued as if she hadn’t heard Jupiter at all.

“There are also cans and plastic rubbish lying around. Who do you think threw them in the forest if not Ralph and his hiking troop? And what about that guy who sneaked from the woods to the Green House twice to mess around in the garden shed? I’ve never seen him here before. He’s definitely one of Ralph’s criminal friends hanging around in the forest. Ralph feeds him ravioli and the cans fly around. People like that should be locked up.”

Karen sighed. “It’s getting worse and worse with you, Bill Greyfield. Anyone who isn’t your friend is a criminal.”

“I would have had proof long ago! But I can’t chase anyone with my foot like that.”

“And you don’t have many friends left.”

“You’re not listening to me at all.”

Jupe cleared his throat. “I don’t want to seem rude, but we are expected at the Green House in a few minutes. Would you rather we ask someone else for directions?”

“Yes!” snapped Bill.

“Straight ahead a bit, then take the first right,” Karen said. “There’s a sign there.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Jupiter said.

“And you come in now, Bill Greyfield, instead of harassing harmless visitors to our fair little town.” With that, Karen disappeared into the house. A squeaky spring mechanism slammed the verandah door shut.

“Harmless visitors indeed!” Bill remarked. The boys didn’t hear what else he said, because Pete drove off.

“Nice man,” said the Second Investigator. “Lovely town.”

He drove to the first turn-off. Earlier, they hadn’t noticed the small self-painted signpost that said ‘Green House’. The road was unpaved and muddy and after two tight bends, it

ended in front of a big old wooden house standing in the shade of a huge fir tree.

The Green House was a former hotel with various layers of green paint peeling off its façade. Apparently lacking the money for renovation, it had been converted into self-catering accommodation without the usual hotel standards. The verandah roof was a little crooked and hung on the banister of the stairs was a sign that said: 'Caution! Wobbly!' In front of a house corner, discarded weathered furniture and a broken trampoline lay next to the pile of bulky waste.

Pete parked the car in a corner of the forecourt where there were a few other cars.

"Look, that's the convertible we saw earlier," Bob remarked. "So we meet again."

"Well, that's off to a good start," Pete muttered.

As the boys were late, they left their luggage in the boot and entered the Green House through a creaking wooden door. Behind it was a corridor leading to a reception counter with no one there. They looked around helplessly.

"Hello?" called Pete timidly.

At the end of the corridor, a door opened and a young man stuck his head out. "Are you the three boys from California? Come on in, we're all in the common room."

The common room of the Green House was a quaint place that smelled of wood and candle wax. Old-fashioned brass lamps hung from the ceiling, spreading warm light. The massive dining table was full of cracks, coffee rims and burn marks. On a shelf against the wall were stacked tattered boxes of board games. The smell of a hearty stew drifted through a swinging door, behind which was probably the kitchen. Four people turned their heads to the door at the same time as The Three Investigators entered.

"Welcome," said the young man who had called them in. He had a three-day beard and wore a woollen cap on his head. "I'm Ralph. You're just in time. We're about to have dinner and before that we can do a little round of introductions."

"Sorry we're a bit late," Pete said with a sheepish look around.

The Three Investigators were by far the youngest tour participants. One of them was the driver of the convertible. He was a touch too tanned, wore black cargo pants and a T-shirt that he had probably bought a size too small on purpose. Underneath, his muscles stood out. He did not let on whether he recognized the three boys or not.

"No problem," Ralph said, glancing at a list of names in his hand. "You're not the last, there's still one person left, but we won't have to wait for him. Why don't you sit down?" The invitation was addressed to everyone and the group came together. Chair legs dragged across the floorboards and soon everyone was sitting in a circle.

Ralph took a seat on the edge of the table, casually rested his ankle on his thigh and smiled into the round. "Good to see you all here. I'll be escorting you around wild Montana for the next few days." He grinned like a little boy who couldn't wait. "I grew up in Two Creeks and know the area like the back of my hand. We'll hike over Capricorn Peak to Bear's Prey Lake and spend four days together. Just so we all know who we're dealing with, please introduce yourselves briefly and tell the others what brought you here." Ralph winked at the young blonde woman to his left.

"Hi. My name is Zoe. I'm Ralph's girlfriend and I've been with the tour since last year. So when it comes to making a fire and setting up camp for the night, I know my way around at least as well as Ralph."

The convertible driver gave an amused snort. When everyone looked at him for that, he quickly cleared his throat. "Hi. I'm Dylan Reid, a sports teacher from Iowa and coach of the Davenport Silver Knights, who won the Iowa football championships last year." Pete could buy that this guy was a sports teacher—all that was missing was the whistle around his neck.

Dylan continued: "The hike is a little relaxing holiday for me before the new training season, and since there are no mountains in Iowa, I just came here to Two Creeks."

"More like raced here," Pete murmured so quietly that only Bob and Jupiter could hear him.

"I hope this isn't just going to be a Sunday stroll." Dylan gave the chubby Jupiter a slightly disparaging sideways glance.

Next to Dylan sat a man in his thirties. He was medium blond, wore nondescript glasses, an inconspicuous light chin beard and was otherwise completely unremarkable. "My name is Simon," he said quietly. "I'm from Wyoming, work in accounting and... yeah... that's it."

Everyone was wondering why Simon did not want to reveal more.

"I'm Angela," the lady to Simon's left said quickly, as if to save the day. "Angela van Limbeek." The woman immediately reminded Jupiter of a younger version of his aunt Mathilda. Angela was a little stout and had something very maternal about her as she looked around the room through her orange glasses and gave everyone a warm smile. Her hair was dark red with a distinct grey tinge. "I am so happy to meet all of you and to hike together through the untouched nature—just the wind and the weather and the birds... I'm sure it will be quite an experience."

Now it was Pete's turn. "I'm Pete from Rocky Beach in California. My grandpa gave me this hike as a gift, but he got hurt. So I took my two best friends with me."

"Bob," Bob said. "I'm the one of the two."

"—And I am the other," said Jupiter. "Jupiter." He wanted to say a few more words, but he didn't get a chance because a car was approaching outside.

"That will be our last hiker," Ralph said with a glance out of the window. Already a car door was heard slamming and shortly afterwards, footsteps in the hallway.

The door to the common room opened and a lean, pale man peered in. He was about in his late thirties and looked like a forgotten rock star in his worn leather jacket. He had his black hair pulled up into a spiky coiffure. Large silver rings were emblazoned on his slightly nicotine-yellow fingers that gripped the door frame.

"Sorry, I'm looking for Ralph Sanders," he muttered indistinctly.

"That's me. You want to join us. Come on in. I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

"Addington."

"Why don't you sit down, Addington?"

"That's my last name," the man said with impatience in his eyes. "We have an appointment, Mr Sanders."

"Yes, to our get-to-know-you meeting. We have just started."

"No, I have an appointment with you... alone."

Ralph seemed genuinely surprised. "It's about the group hike, right?"

"Group hike?" Mr Addington repeated. "Certainly not. Do I look like I'm with the Scouts? I booked you as a guide."

Ralph shook his head. "I'm sorry about that, but there must be a misunderstanding. I wasn't talking to you personally on the phone, was I? But with..."

"With my assistant George." Mr Addington sighed. "Could I speak to you privately for a moment, Mr Sanders?"

"Of course. Zoe, can you take over?" The two men stepped into the hallway.

"All right, where were we?" asked Zoe.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Excuse me, where is the washroom?"

"Down the corridor, past reception and turn right."

Jupiter nodded and rose from his chair. Bob and Pete gave him meaningful looks. They both knew him well enough to know that he didn't really need to go to the washroom.

Ralph and Mr Addington were standing a few metres away in the middle of the narrow corridor. Addington narrowed his eyes when he saw Jupiter. However, the First Investigator didn't let on. He muttered an apology and pushed past the two of them to go to the washroom. There he did not let the door close behind him, but left a gap and pricked up his ears. The conversation between the two could be heard clearly.

"I'll keep it short. I don't want a group hike. What I need is just a guide to take me alone to Bear's Prey Lake."

"I'm very sorry about that, Mr Addington, but for the next four days I'm hiking to the lake with this group, and right after that with another one. I could offer you a private tour the week after next."

"That's way too late."

"Then I'm sorry."

Addington sighed in annoyance. "How much do you want? I'll pay what you earn from this group tour—with something on top."

"I can't do that, Mr Addington. I can't just send these people home like this, I hope you realize that... and would you please not smoke in here?"

"Double that?"

Ralph's voice became cooler. "I am really very sorry for our misunderstanding. You can join the group. That is the only offer I can give you."

"But that's... George cleared it with you, didn't he?"

"It was a misunderstanding, as I said."

Addington gave up. "All right, then. I don't suppose there's any other way. Is there a hotel in town?"

"You can spend the night here with the rest of us. I had a room set aside for you anyway."

"In this dump?"

"It's included in the price. Think of it as part of the adventure."

Addington sighed. "I'll get my things."

The entrance door creaked and slammed shut. Jupiter waited until Ralph had returned to the common room before leaving the washroom. Through the dirty corridor windows he saw Addington standing by his car, talking on the phone while smoking with frantic puffs. One of the windows was pushed up a little. Jupe crouched down, held his ear as close as possible to the gap and listened.

"I don't know what went wrong there, George, but probably this Sanders guy was just too stupid to understand what you wanted from him when you talked to him on the phone. Stupid hillbillies... What? ... No, why would I leave? All this way for nothing? That would be really stupid. I'm here, and I'm not gonna let this Scout troop keep me from my half a million you-know-what... What did you say? ... No, I don't know who's in the group, but believe me, I'll get rid of them."

3. The Dead Letterbox

“Oh, did you lose something?”

Jupiter winced. Angela van Limbeek had stepped out of the common room and saw Jupiter crouching on the floor.

“Yes, my key,” claimed the First Investigator. “Found it!” As if to prove it, he held out his bulging hand to her. Angela was too far away to see that there was nothing in it at all.

Jupiter braced himself and nodded to Angela, who in turn now disappeared into the washroom. Addington had finished his phone call and was rummaging around in his car.

When Jupiter returned to the common room, Ralph was starting to tell the group what the next few days would be about.

“A few words about the luggage. What you need are hiking socks, hiking boots, your backpack, your tent, warm, light clothing, camping cutlery and crockery and a toothbrush. What you don’t need is everything else.

“We will be in the wilderness for days and will need to take everything we eat with us. We can refill water on the way, but we won’t get enough from the berries and mushrooms we pick in between. So please leave your SLR cameras and your thousand-page holiday readings here as the backpacks will get heavy. The good news is that the load gets lighter day by day. Are there any questions? No? Good. We’ll sort out the final details in the morning.”

Ralph stood up. “Now Zoe and I will show you to your rooms. Settle in and start loading your backpacks. You can leave in your room anything that you are not taking along. No one will steal anything here. In an hour, we’ll have a last warm dinner at the table before we sit around a campfire from tomorrow.”

While Ralph and Zoe sorted out the room keys, Dylan, the sports teacher, turned to Jupiter and whispered: “What was going on out there?” he asked good-humouredly.

“Excuse me?”

“You were in the washroom. Didn’t you hear what that washed-up rock star wanted from Ralph?”

“He would have liked to have Ralph as a private guide,” Jupiter said.

“That was it?”

Jupiter just shrugged his shoulders. At that moment, Mr Addington re-entered the room, so Dylan did not continue the conversation.

The three boys were allocated a large room on the ground floor, whereas the rest of the participants had smaller individual rooms on the first floor. Ralph led the rest up the wooden staircase which crackled and creaked under the worn sisal carpet with every step. “Be careful, the runner throws waves and it’s easy to trip,” Ralph warned.

Pete thought of the wobbly railing outside. “The second death trap is here,” he muttered.

Zoe showed the three boys their room. It was a simply furnished four-bed room. Yellowed photographs were pinned to the walls. There was a faint musty smell. They drew lots to see who got which bed and then went back downstairs to get their luggage from the car.

“Well?” asked Bob as they stood by the boot. “What did you overhear?”

“Overhear? Me?”

“Don’t pretend. We know you, Jupe.”

“Let’s put it this way—feigning a human need was entirely appropriate to the situation. I was able to reveal one or two secrets of the newcomer.”

“Reveal one or two secrets...” Pete repeated while heaving his backpack out of the car. “Here we go again. You sound like we have a case in the works, Jupe—but we won’t, if I may remind you. We have a holiday. I invited you guys to come, so I insist we are here for a holiday.”

The First Investigator reported the overheard phone conversation.

“Half a million what?” asked Bob. “Stars in the sky? Leaves on the trees? Wild strawberries?”

“How about dollars?” suggested Jupiter.

“But not in the forest,” Pete interjected.

“Who knows, Pete,” Jupe said thoughtfully. “Bill Greyfield, the former ranger of Two Creeks, is of the opinion that things are not right in the forest.”

“Things are not right in his head either, if you ask me,” Pete commented.

“Maybe so,” Jupiter admitted, “but fortunately part of his confused tale can easily be checked for its truthfulness.” He pointed to a shed that stood at the edge of the overgrown garden behind the house. “That’s the shed Mr Greyfield was talking about.”

“What did he say about it?” asked Pete. “I didn’t listen that closely during the clamour.”

“He was talking about a guy who came out of the woods and was rummaging around,” Bob said.

“He said ‘messed around’,” Jupiter corrected him, “whatever that means.”

“—And Mr Greyfield just happened to see this?” Pete scratched his nose doubtfully. “I don’t think so.”

“We can still have a quick look,” Bob suggested.

They went to the shed. It was not locked. Inside, everything was full of rusty and cobwebbed garden tools.

“No ravioli cans,” Pete noted, “and nothing else conspicuous either. We don’t even have to go to the back. It’s all full of dust. No one’s been there for years.”

They closed the door and were about to go back into the house when Bob’s eyes fell on a bird house hanging on the outside of the shed. Something white was sticking out of the opening. Bob stood on his tiptoes and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It was a lined piece of paper, apparently torn out of a notebook. There was a handwritten message:

Thomas,

Urgently need medication for my cough! Possibly pneumonia. Also need something I can use to scare bears away. Urgent!

Ernie

“Bears?” asked Bob, showing the note to his friends. “Thomas? Ernie? What does this mean?”

“First of all, it means that Bill Greyfield’s head may be in a more right place than one would like to assume,” Jupe said. “This bird house is a dead letterbox. It’s a secret location for individuals to leave and collect items or messages without having to physically meet. Perhaps the stranger Mr Greyfield saw coming out of the woods used it—Ernie or Thomas.”

“Is Mr Addington’s name perhaps Thomas?” pondered Pete.

“Why Mr Addington of all people?” asked Jupiter.

“Well, his mysterious behaviour and this mysterious message might have a connection there. I don’t know.”

“We’ll easily find out... but first we should put the note back so as not to startle anyone.”

“Startle?” said Pete. “That sounds like a new case again.”

“You were just talking about mysteries with a possible connection,” Jupiter said. “Don’t panic, Pete. I’m just advising increased vigilance.”

“Whenever you say something like that, danger is on the way.” Pete sighed, resigned to his fate. “We’d better go back to the house and pack our things. Maybe the new case will go away if we pretend not to notice it.”

By dinner time, they had finished packing their stuff. The group met again in the common room. The stew, whose spicy scent had been hanging in the air all along, was steaming on the table.

“Dig in,” Zoe said. “From tomorrow onwards, it will be only rice and beans!”

Jupiter winced inwardly. “The description of the hike said that food would be provided along the way.”

“It is... like I said, rice and beans. Ha! Ha! Ha!” Zoe’s laughter left open whether she was serious or not.

Over dinner, Ralph and his girlfriend talked a lot about the area they had grown up in, the harsh Montana winters, the loneliness in the mountains and the black bears that occasionally left the forest to look for food in the rubbish bins of Two Creeks.

Angela was worried. “Bears? Aren’t they dangerous?”

“Don’t worry,” Zoe said. “Basically, black bears are omnivores, and they like berries and honey much better than human flesh.”

“But we are in the middle of the forest.”

“The bears will stay away from us as long as we stick to a few rules. They have a very fine nose and are easily attracted by tempting scents. Therefore, we will store all supplies in airtight canisters. It is important that we immediately pack away anything that is edible. It’s not only because of the bears, as we also want to have a clean environment and leave nothing behind but our footprints.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t trample any daisies,” Dylan said and laughed at his own joke—but he was the only one.

“But what do we do if a bear shows up anyway?” asked Angela.

“Definitely don’t panic,” Zoe said. “If you run away, the bear might mistake you for prey and give chase.”

“Then it will get a load of buckshot,” Dylan said good-humouredly. “I’m sure you’ll take a rifle with you.”

Zoe rose to reply, but Dylan beat her to it: “I’d be interested in the professional’s opinion.” He turned to Ralph.

“The professional agrees with the expert,” Ralph clarified, nodding to Zoe.

“Not a rifle, but a defensive spray,” Zoe continued. “It’s basically a powerful pepper spray, but we only use that in an emergency. So far we have never needed to use it on our tours.”

“I’ll be near that pepper spray then.” Angela laughed uncertainly, while Dylan made it clear by snorting that he thought a rifle was a better idea.

Simon, on the other hand, had turned pale and was staring intently at his plate, while Mr Addington gave the impression that none of this was any of his business and that he just

happened to be sitting here.

“As long as we don’t attract a bear with our food or rubbish, we’re on the safe side, I promise,” Zoe said.

“On the way here, we ran into a resident of Two Creeks who was complaining about the hiking groups leaving rubbish lying around at Capricorn Peak,” Jupiter said as casually as he could.

“You must have been talking to Bill Greyfield,” Ralph guessed. “You mustn’t take him so seriously. He doesn’t like me and thinks I’m a poacher. He thinks that only he, as a former ranger, is allowed in the forest and that hikers have no business there... but that doesn’t mean anything. I also saw the rubbish, got annoyed by it, collected it and took it away. No one from my hiking groups did that, but there are other people walking up there too.”

Jupiter thought he detected a slight twitch in the face of Mr Addington, who was just getting up to smoke a cigarette outside.

After a portion of blueberry pudding, which quickly restored Angela’s good mood, Ralph announced that they would be leaving early the next morning.

After the meal, The Three Investigators helped the two hiking guides clear the table while the rest of the group dispersed. Pete carried the dishes into the kitchen, Bob filled the dishwasher and Jupe put the leftovers in the fridge.

On the way to their room, the First Investigator’s eyes fell on a sheet of paper lying on a counter in the entrance area of the Green House. It was Ralph’s list of participants, their addresses, and the rooms allocated to each of them in the Green House. So the participants were Angela van Limbeek, Simon Cobby, Pete Crenshaw, Bob Andrews, Jupiter Jones, Dylan Reid and J. Addington. With his photographic memory, Jupiter took note of the information, especially that for Mr Addington. Then he put the sheet of paper back and rejoined his friends in their room.

“Did you just see Addington?” murmured Bob. “He was sitting on the verandah, smoking in the dark and had a bottle of wine in his hand that was already half empty.”

“—Which is not forbidden,” Pete said as he rummaged in his luggage for his toothbrush. “Please no investigation discussions now. I’m totally tired, and we have to get up early tomorrow. I’m going straight to sleep.”

“Me too,” Jupiter muttered, reaching for his mobile phone and typing a name into the search field.

“Addington & Sons?” Pete read with a glance over his friend’s shoulder. “You can’t help it, can you?”

“I just like to know who I’m dealing with,” Jupiter defended himself.

“How did you trace him to Addington & Sons?” Pete asked.

“From the participant sheet I saw on the counter outside,” Jupe explained. “His address was given as a business address of this company in Seattle. The name alone tells me that it is a family business. Also, the participant sheet listed Mr Addington’s name as ‘J. Addington’, not his full name, just the initial.”

“What’s so strange about that?” Pete asked.

“Nothing,” Jupe replied. “Just something that I noted. In fact, I find it funny that Mr Addington’s assistant booked the hike for him and there was such a misunderstanding... and then that strange phone call regarding the half a million whatever...”

“So who are we dealing with?” asked Bob.

“John Addington,” Jupe read from a website. “The company Addington & Sons was founded a hundred years ago by Gerald Addington—that’s John Addington’s grandfather. They make tools.”

“John Addington, heir to a drilling machine empire,” Pete said. “How mysterious...”

“After all, it’s a multi-million dollar company. And as for this guy... wait a minute...” Jupiter skimmed a short article from an online business magazine. “His siblings, with whom he had run the company, kicked him off the board three years ago, and downgraded him to be an ordinary employee.”

The First Investigator typed in a new search. “The reasons are anyone’s guess, but there are some juicy headlines on John Addington. He was arrested once for driving while intoxicated, for rioting in a hotel room, and for a fight in the street...”

“So there’s a lot going on with him,” Bob observed. “No wonder his family didn’t want him at the helm of the company anymore. Probably he’s still there due to family ties.”

“Away from the company, he plays bass in an unsuccessful rock band and continues to have trouble with the police from time to time,” Jupe added.

“So he’s the black sheep,” Pete summarized, “but that’s not forbidden... and it’s certainly not a case for The Three Investigators.”

“And what about the half-million whatnot?” Jupiter countered.

“Maybe you heard wrong and he was dreaming about his record sales,” Pete suggested. “Can we go to sleep now?”

Jupiter nodded and switched off his mobile phone. They got ready for bed.

Ten minutes later, the light was switched off and Pete and Bob fell asleep almost instantly. However, Jupiter lay awake. He had slept in the car on the drive here and didn’t feel tired at all.

For half an hour, he listened to Pete and Bob’s quiet breaths. There was still some shuffling in the corridor to the communal washrooms and up and down the stairs. At some point, it became quiet in the Green House, except for an occasional creaking noise in the woodwork.

The First Investigator thought about John Addington. Perhaps the next few days would shed light on whether he was right to put a question mark over the man. Then his thoughts wandered to the hardships he would face with days of backpacking, probably constantly uphill... He hoped not to end up as the slowest of the group. The prospect of rice and beans also worried him. Would he get full? Or should he perhaps make a secret emergency stockpile? As if in answer, his stomach began to growl. Jupiter sighed, threw back the covers and left the room.

The common room was in darkness. Only the weak light of the only street lamp standing in front of the Green House fell through the windows. He decided not to switch on any lights so as not to alert the other people.

When Jupe entered the kitchen, the delicious smell of stew immediately hit his nose. There was still some left and such a stew could also be eaten cold. He grabbed a spoon and in the white light of the open fridge door, he scooped straight from the pot.

On the kitchen counter next to the fridge, the food for the hike was already ready—rice and beans, as Zoe had said, plus a few packets of noodles, fresh vegetables, spices and a whole box full of energy bars—a high-calorie food concentrate for athletes. The box was already opened. Several of the pieces were already missing. This was the perfect emergency ration. It wouldn’t be a big deal if he now had one or two—

Suddenly Jupiter noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A shadow was moving in front of the window that led out to the back of the Green House. Outside, the moon shone silvery on the overgrown garden. A figure crept along the house towards the shed. It was too dark to make out more, and soon the figure had disappeared from Jupiter’s field of vision.

Was there perhaps a window outside in the corridor from which he could observe the person further?

Anyway, just don't forget the energy bars! Jupiter reached into the box. Just then, an alarm went off!

4. The Trip Hazard

Jupiter froze like a rabbit caught in headlights. It took him two or three seconds to realize his mistake. The piercing alarm had nothing to do with his grip on the energy bar. A car alarm had in fact gone off outside. The light from flashing headlights fell into the kitchen.

The First Investigator rushed to the window. It was a mud-splattered black pick-up truck with rhythmically flashing headlights. The honking echoed through the night.

A door was yanked open on the upper floor of the Green House. Someone rushed down the stairs. Then came a scream and a thump.

Jupiter forgot the energy bars and hurried into the hallway. A figure lay at the foot of the stairs, writhing in pain.

"Ralph!" Jupiter ran to the young man who was holding his shin through clenched teeth. Blood trickled down his forehead. "You're hurt. Lie very still."

Zoe appeared at the top of the stairs. She sucked in a frightened breath, switched on the light and came running down the steps.

"Look out, Zoe!" groaned Ralph. "I tripped over something."

Zoe reduced her pace, but did not see any trip hazards.

"You have a small cut on your head, but it looks worse than it is," Jupiter said. "A plaster will do, I'd say."

"My leg..."

"Let me see." Zoe squatted down next to Jupiter. Carefully she pushed up Ralph's right trouser leg. What was revealed underneath sent a wave of imagined pain through Jupiter's body. Extensively scraped skin, blood... He turned his head away.

"Damn," Zoe muttered. "The doc should definitely take a look at that. Jupiter, there's a phone at reception. There's a little list of emergency numbers above it. Can you please call Dr Williams and tell him what happened? He lives here in Two Creeks."

Jupiter nodded and ran to the reception. In the meantime, the other occupants of the Green House had also woken up to the persistent sound of the alarm. Angela, Dylan and Simon were standing on the parapet of the upstairs corridor, looking down in fright. Only Mr Addington was not there. Bob and Pete came to Zoe's rescue. Together they hoisted Ralph into a more comfortable position.

Pete spotted the car key Ralph had dropped when he fell. "I'll take care of the alarm." He took the key, went outside and switched off the alarm. The sudden silence was surreal.

For a moment, Pete looked around. The night was misty. The street lamp made the air glow. The tall fir tree cast its jet-black shadow on an old basketball next to the pile of bulky waste. Following a sudden inspiration, Pete went to the corner of the house and looked at the garden shed. He didn't see anybody there.

"Anything?" asked Bob behind him.

Pete winced, for he had not heard his friend coming. "No one here. Whoever set off the alarm is long gone."

"Now you sound like we have a case," Bob commented. "It could have been a cat or a forest critter or a malfunction."

"No harm taking a look around," Pete replied and then went to the bird house and reached in.

"Well?" Bob asked.

"The note is gone."

Jupiter had contacted Dr Williams and told him about the situation. Five minutes later, the doctor was there and examined Ralph's leg.

"The good news is that nothing is broken," Dr Williams said in a calm tone and took off his glasses. "—But you're going to have some fun with that bruise, Ralph. It's best to keep your leg elevated and off the ground for a few days."

"I can't. I have a tour to Bear's Prey Lake in the morning," Ralph protested as he painfully let Zoe help him up.

Dr Williams laughed. "You can forget about that."

"But—" Ralph shifted his weight onto the injured leg and immediately winced in pain. Concerned, he hung his head. "Okay. I can forget it."

The doctor patted Ralph's shoulder encouragingly. "Don't worry, you'll be as good as new in a few days... and then you should take care of the worn carpet on the stairs, or someone's going to break their neck next."

Dr Williams said goodbye and left the Green House.

"I guess that's it," Dylan said from the top of the stairs. "I guess the hike is cancelled."

Everyone looked expectantly at Ralph.

"Do we have to go back home now?" asked Angela.

Ralph sighed. "I'm afraid—"

"Of course not," Zoe interrupted him. "I'll take the tour."

"Excuse me?" Dylan raised his eyebrows.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Ralph asked Zoe.

"Why not? Don't look so incredulous, Ralph. I have accompanied you often enough. I know the way, I know how to make a fire, and I know where mushrooms and berries grow."

"The bridge over the mountain stream has collapsed," Ralph said. "You'll have to take the new route." He sounded worried.

"I know that too. We worked out the route together." Zoe looked up at Dylan, Simon and Angela. "Don't worry, the tour will proceed."

"Great." Dylan snorted, letting everyone know that he didn't think it was great at all. He turned and went back to his room.

"Now then." Zoe was not put off by Dylan's demeanour. "March back to your beds! It's going to be a busy day."

Angela and Simon also returned to their rooms.

"Could you help Ralph up the stairs?" Zoe asked The Three Investigators.

"We can do that," Pete said and nodded to Bob. They crossed their hands and used them to form a seat for Ralph. He held on to their shoulders and the two of them carried the young man up the stairs.

"Thank you guys."

"No problem," Pete waved it off. "Good night and get well soon!"

They said goodbye at Ralph and Zoe's room door. After it had closed, Jupe put his finger to his lips and signalled to Pete and Bob.

"What's wrong?" whispered Bob.

"I want to see what Ralph tripped over... but preferably without anyone noticing."

“What’s he supposed to have tripped over?” murmured Pete. “The carpet, of course. Just look at its condition.”

“That’s what I was about to do.”

The three of them went down the stairs examining each step. On many of them, the sisal runner was totally worn out. Thick loose fibres dangled from the edges of the steps in several places.

“I’m surprised it was Ralph, of all people, who tripped,” Jupe whispered. “After all, he knows the Green House well and even warned us about the carpet.”

“Well, he was just careless because of the alarm,” Pete assumed.

The First Investigator lifted up a particularly long and sagging sisal fibre on the fifth step from the top. On the left side it was still connected to the carpet, on the right it had already been torn out. When Jupiter looked more closely, he discovered a single fibre, thin and sturdy as twine, leading out of the torn end. Then he examined the struts of the stair railing at this point.

“Look at this! This fibre was knotted to the banister and snapped when Ralph tripped over it. The other half is still hanging here.” When Jupiter tentatively brought the two loose ends together, the sagging fibre stretched and it became a dangerous trip hazard in this way.

Bob raised his eyebrows in amazement. “Someone has set a trap for Ralph! That’s why the car alarm went off.”

“You mean it was someone from the house?” Pete asked a little too loudly.

Jupiter put his finger to his lips and told his friends to retreat.

When they had closed the door to the room behind them, Pete continued: “So the perpetrator would first have had to set the trap, then go out and set off the car alarm and run back into the house and up the stairs within three seconds. After all, everyone was in their rooms.”

“All of them?” asked Jupiter.

“We haven’t seen Mr Addington,” Bob noted. “Is it possible that he slept through the whole commotion?”

Pete shook his head. “No... but it’s possible that he didn’t care.”

“—Or that he wasn’t in his room at all.” Jupiter reported on the dark figure he had seen in the overgrown garden.

“Do you think that could have been Mr Addington?” asked Pete.

“Possibly. It was very dark, so it’s hard to say.”

“The front door to the Green House was unlocked when I went out,” Pete recalled. “So it could have been a stranger. He came in, set up the trip hazard, went back out and set off the alarm. That definitely makes sense. Maybe it was that crazy ranger—that Bill Greyfield. He’s trying to stop us from throwing cans of ravioli in the forest.”

“Possibly... but we don’t have the evidence.”

“—And the ravioli cans.” The Second Investigator laughed at his own joke.

Jupiter turned back to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Just looking around for clues,” Jupiter replied, “and to check on Mr Addington.”

“How do you know which room he is in?” Pete asked.

“It was on the participant list I saw earlier,” Jupe replied.

“Bravo,” Pete remarked. “The leader of The Three Investigators is as observant as always, especially when he smells a case around the corner.”

Jupe left the room and crept up the stairs to Addington’s room. He listened with bated breath. A steady snore came through the door.

The First Investigator was about to turn back when he heard another sound—the growling of his stomach. That’s right, he had to take care of that urgently.

He went down to the kitchen, put four energy bars in the pockets of his pants and, after a moment’s hesitation, took a fifth. Now maybe a little dessert? There had been some blueberry pudding in the cup after all. He opened the fridge door.

The cup with the pudding was no longer there.

5. The Hike Begins

It was early morning. The whole group was standing on the verandah. The supplies had already been distributed to all the participants in odour-proof plastic containers that looked like small barrels. Everyone had been given one of these containers. Last-minute preparations were made, the shoulder and waist straps were adjusted tightly, the water bottles were filled up and the shoelaces were tied tighter.

“Whew!” Jupiter gasped involuntarily as he shouldered the backpack. It was heavier than he had expected. “What have I got myself into?”

“Ah, a young man like you!” Dylan Reid patted the First Investigator on the shoulder with a laugh and then looked down at him scrutinizingly. “You don’t carry much else around, do you?”

Jupiter was speechless for a second, and that didn’t happen often. By the time he thought of a retort, Dylan had already turned away.

Zoe, who had overheard Dylan’s remark, shook her head. “This guy is really sensitive like a—”

“—Sports teacher,” Jupiter said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t.”

Just then, Ralph hobbled to the group and expressed his regret to everyone that he could not be going along. His shin was badly swollen by now and no one doubted that he should definitely stay at home.

“I’m all for eating half the supplies on the first day,” Angela said, groaning under the weight of her backpack.

“Is everyone ready?” Zoe finally called out to the group.

“Mr Addington is still not here,” Angela remarked as she adjusted the length of her walking sticks. “In fact, he did not even turn up for breakfast.”

“I just met him in the washroom,” Ralph said. “He overslept and he’ll be along in a minute. You guys go ahead. I’ll tell him how to catch up with you.”

“Let’s go then!” Zoe called out.

With a final wave in Ralph’s direction, the group started moving.

The hiking trail started right at the Green House and was initially an uphill forest path. Over a wooden bridge they crossed one of the two creeks that had given Two Creeks its name. Further on, the path led past some gardens on the hillside.

“Look!” Pete pointed to an overgrown piece of land that had also once been a garden before someone had stopped looking after it. On a white bench under a willow sat Bill Greyfield, with his hands resting on his walking stick, scowling at them.

“He doesn’t look very happy,” Bob said. “Do you think he’s mad because he tried to foil our hiking trip last night and it didn’t work out?”

“We still lack the circumstantial evidence for that,” Jupe said.

“You know what, I’ll have a word with him,” Bob said.

“What are you up to?” the First Investigator wanted to know.

"I'll try to see what else I can get out of him. He hardly noticed me in the back seat yesterday. You two go on!"

Reluctantly, Jupiter and Pete continued on their way while Bob stepped up to the hedge separating Mr Greyfield's garden from the forest path. "Excuse me, sir?"

"What do you want?" Greyfield snapped at him.

"Just a quick word with you."

"About what? You're one of the three guys who couldn't find their way to the Green House yesterday."

Bob nodded. "I can't get out of my head what you said to us that there's rubbish lying around up there and all that. You know, I'm a member of my school's nature club, and I'm involved with the forest. I could keep my eyes open for you, if you want."

Bill Greyfield mumbled something unintelligible. He seemed to wonder whether he could trust Bob or not. Eventually he pushed himself up from his bench and limped closer. "If you really want to protect the forest, you'd best not to go in there at all. The forest can do very well without you."

"You went in there too," Bob reminded him.

"Don't get smart with me! I was a ranger and that was my job."

"I mean, last week, when you sprained your ankle."

"That's when I tried to turn in a poacher."

"Do you really think Ralph Sanders is a poacher?"

"I don't know what he is, but he's doing something in the forest—he and his sidekicks—digging holes, for example." He pointed accusingly at his support shoe. "Of course I need proof if I want to convict him."

"If he is a poacher, he must have somewhere to put the dead animals. Have you ever looked around his place?" Bob asked as innocently as possible.

"Indeed I have, wise guy. The shed where I saw that other guy, I check it regularly, in fact, just last night. I know Sanders isn't stupid. There's nothing in the shed but cans of ravioli and some other foodstuff... and only sometimes, not always. That disgusting stuff is for the hikes, am I right? How can anyone eat them!" He shook his head.

Bob left Mr Greyfield in his delusions, instead, he wanted to get at something else. "Last night there was suddenly this car alarm, wasn't there?"

"Yes, from Ralph's fuel-guzzling car. I almost had a heart attack."

"That means you were in his garden then?"

"What is this? An interrogation? Sanders is the criminal! Where is he anyway? I only saw Zoe."

"He is unable to go. Zoe is leading the group instead."

"Oh, that's interesting." Suddenly Greyfield looked past Bob towards the Green House. From there, Mr Addington was just approaching. He was wearing black jeans, biker boots and an army backpack. He was holding a cigarette in one hand and his mobile phone in the other, staring at the screen.

"Just seeing these people..." Bill Greyfield shook his head. "—Either they're wearing sinfully expensive outdoor clothes, brand new of course—once and never again—or they're stomping through the forest in bloody cowboy boots, smoking and throwing their fags around... and most important to them is their mobile phones."

Addington hardly noticed Bob as he walked past him, as he was busy with his phone. "Ah, George, at last you answered. I thought I'd never catch you." Then he was out of earshot.

"I think I have to go, Mr Greyfield," Bob said, "otherwise I'll lose my way."

“Yes, yes,” Greyfield grumbled. “You’d better hurry up. With you people from the city, there’s always the danger that you’ll turn around once and not know where you are. But I warn you—soon I’ll be able to walk again, and don’t you dare let me find another can of ravioli on Capricorn Peak. I’ll hold you responsible. You! Understand?”

Bob left Greyfield standing there and followed Addington as quietly as possible, walking on the grass in the middle of the forest path. He hoped to hear something of the phone call without Addington noticing him.

Not a moment too soon, Bob was within earshot. He realized that Addington was speaking very loudly into his phone, probably because of a poor connection. Bob took his mobile phone out of his pocket, put his earphones in his ears to pretend that he was listening to something, but instead, he started a voice recording of Addington’s conversation:

“—I know that none of this is going according to plan, but it’s no drama now. I have to find the *Hummingbird*. I don’t care about the rest, and even this stupid hiking group won’t stop me! ... What? ... I said, I’m not going to let the hiking group get in my way... Yeah, it’s a bad connection. It’s going to get worse once I get into the forest. I’ll probably lose reception in a minute so don’t be surprised. I’ll be back in a couple of days... Yes, George, I know it’s risky but it’s not like the police are gonna be at my door every day. After that Bellingham fiasco, they only came to my house twice. I’m willing to take that risk. I’ll pay a fine if I have to. Once I find the gold, I don’t care... I said I don’t care! George? Can you still hear me? ... George? Damn... Hey, wait a minute. Say, have you been following me all this time? Are you eavesdropping on me?”

6. At the First Rest Stop

Addington had put his phone away, noticing that Bob had been only a few metres behind him.

Bob looked up from his mobile phone display, looked questioningly at Addington and pulled his earphones out of his ears. "Sorry, did you say something?"

The man waved it off. "Nothing!"

Bob nodded, put the earphones back in his ears and pretended to listen to music.

The path soon led to a grassy turning area for forestry vehicles. There they caught up with the others again and the trail led into the forest, which welcomed them with cool, damp air. Here and there, the morning haze still hovered over the ground.

Small groups were forming. In front was Zoe, talking to Angela van Limbeek. Behind her came Dylan Reid, who was trying to wring a conversation out of 'Silent Simon', as Pete had nicknamed him. Simon answered in such monosyllables that Dylan finally gave up and wandered silently along beside him.

Next came Mr Addington, walking alone. The Three Investigators brought up the rear, some distance apart, so that they could talk to each other undisturbed.

Bob told his friends about his conversation with Mr Greyfield. "I don't think he had anything to do with the car alarm. He was far too willing to tell about his late night visit to the shed for that. Besides, he was honestly surprised that Ralph was not leading the tour. I think we can cross him off the list of suspects."

"At least keep him in view," Jupiter said.

"More importantly, I was able to eavesdrop on Addington when he was on the phone. Listen to this!" Bob handed Pete and Jupiter an earphone each and played the recording.

"Very good investigation work, Bob," Jupiter praised after they had heard everything.

"Hummingbird?" asked Pete. "Gold? What does that mean? Are there rare hummingbirds in this area, perhaps? So rare that they are worth half a million dollars?"

"Golden hummingbirds?" suggested Bob.

"Far-fetched," Jupiter agreed, "but it sounds like Addington got into a conflict with the police during an incident in Bellingham. Surely something can be found out about such an occurrence." He nodded to Bob, who immediately switched on his mobile phone and entered the search terms 'harbour', 'Bellingham', 'hummingbird', 'police', 'gold' and 'Addington'.

"Bellingham... where is that anyway?" asked Pete.

"North of Seattle," Jupiter knew. "It's a small town."

Bob didn't get a single hit, but that wasn't because of the search terms. "Darn, no more network." He kept his mobile phone.

"Then we'll have to rely on our powers of observation from now on," the First Investigator decided. "Let's keep an eye on Mr Addington."

Pete sighed. "So, it's a case after all..."

"We would stumble across a case even on the moon," Bob said. "We are, after all, The Three Investigators, and 'We Investigate Anything'! Everyone knows that!"

"How about we change our motto to 'We Poke Our Noses Into Anything'?" Pete suggested.

“Very funny,” Jupe countered.

Silently they walked on, through a dense mixed forest that seemed to get darker and darker the further they move away from civilization. The path led through the mossy green as if into another world. Between rocks full of colourful lichen, small streams gurgled here and there. A woodpecker tapped above their heads. When the sun came out, the dense canopy of leaves shimmered as if it were alive.

The path became so narrow and was covered in thick roots such that the three of them could no longer walk side by side. They had to watch where they stepped. At the same time, it was getting steeper and steeper.

“What’s with you?” Pete asked the First Investigator, who took one step in front of him, panting.

“The charms of nature... will hopefully outweigh the... not inconsiderable efforts... I have to endure...” Jupiter wheezed. “Alternatively... the charms... of a new... investigation might be better...”

Every step burned his thighs. The waist straps of his backpack cut deep into his sides. His panting seemed louder than that of a steam locomotive. Soon, Bob and Pete overtook him.

Jupiter kept his eyes down and studied his hiking map to distract himself. When he finally lifted his head to see if the end of the climb was in sight, he was relieved to find that the path was strenuous for everyone, even for Dylan and Pete. Only Zoe didn’t seem to mind any of it. After all, she did the hike regularly.

For an endless hour and a half, they went uphill without interruption. Little by little, the others disappeared from Jupiter’s field of vision. Only Angela, the second to last, could be seen from time to time between the trees.

When the First Investigator finally reached the ridge, all the others had already put down their backpacks and sat down exhausted on the patches of moss that grew here in a small clearing.

“Well, there you are,” Pete said without any mockery in his voice.

Jupiter threw his backpack off him. His back was drenched with sweat, his head glowed as if with fever. Thankfully, the moss bed on which he dropped on was wonderfully soft. For a moment, he just lay there, listening to the wind in the trees and the low murmur of his fellow hikers, noticing how his breathing slowly calmed down. Then he drank his water bottle half-empty and munched on one of the sandwiches they had prepared that morning.

The forest had thinned out and the tall trees gave a view of steep slopes and high mountains in the distance. Near the peaks, patches of snow shone in the sun.

“When you have finished eating, please stow all rubbish and leftovers in your bear-proof container,” Zoe reminded them.

Angela immediately packed the rest of her sandwich and closed the lid. “What if a bear still shows up?” she asked worriedly. “I don’t know what to do then.”

“Well, then you show it who’s in charge,” Dylan interjected. “The bear will realize that it’s dealing with a superior being and it will take flight.”

“Superior being, my foot!” Zoe cleared her throat. “No human is superior to a bear, Dylan. Still, what you say isn’t entirely wrong. Bears usually avoid encounters with humans. Most of the time, confrontations are more of an accident.

“Basically, there are only two situations where a bear can get nasty—when it wants to protect its cubs or when it is hungry and suspects there is something to eat. That’s why—for all our love of peace and quiet in nature—we should not behave too quietly. By doing so, we indicate to a bear that we are here, and most of the time it will then not come close at all.

“Also if you encounter a bear in the wild, there is no risk that there are more bears nearby. By nature, they are solitary animals and travel alone, except when in pairs in mating season or a mother with its cubs. They do not live in large family groups or participate in hunts, but they will co-exist within the same areas.”

Angela did not seem convinced. “—But what if...”

“Then it’s best to be calm and level-headed. The less insecurity you show, the better.”

“Just like I said,” Dylan added smugly. “Show the beast who’s the boss.” He laughed, but no one laughed with him.

Simon had been silently eating his lunch the whole time, looking down at the ground, while Addington sat apart and smoked. His legs bobbed restlessly in a beat that only he could hear. He stared at a map he had taken from a blue folder in his backpack and acted as if he did not belong to the group at all. It was all the more surprising when he suddenly said something: “When do we reach the lake?”

“We still have a few hours of hiking ahead of us before we arrive at our first night’s camp. We won’t make it to the lake until the day after tomorrow.”

“The day after tomorrow?” Addington shook his head and pointed to his map. “It’s only a short distance from here, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, but we won’t take the direct route. I’ll show you...” She bent over the map. “This is our route—up and down Capricorn Peak and then to the lake.”

“But that’s a huge detour. Why don’t we just walk along this river? The...” He looked at his map. “Nitsi... imihh...”

“Nitsíimihkaa,” Zoe corrected. “It means ‘I caught fish’ in the language of the native people here. In any case, to answer your question, the direct route is impassable at the moment because further on, a bridge over the mountain stream has collapsed. Also, the point is not to reach the lake as quickly as possible, but to see something of the landscape in the process. Tomorrow we will climb Capricorn Peak to get some fantastic views.”

“I’m not interested in the views.”

“I’m sorry about that, Mr Addington, but that’s why we’re here.”

Angrily, Addington stuffed the map back into his backpack and stood up. “Then we’d better not waste any time.”

7. The Bellingham Incident

After the rest, they hiked for another three hours, taking only one short break to fill up their water bottles at a stream.

The hike was now alternately uphill and downhill, which was especially annoying for Jupiter. Every metre of altitude climbed with difficulty was immediately given back. The shoes were pressing and the knees were hurting. The only thing that made up for the exertion was the beautiful nature. They encountered some deer, crossed fern forests, saw huge, ancient cedar trees and lots of small waterfalls.

Redemption came quite unexpectedly. The path bent around a rock and a clearing spread out in front of them. The trees were far apart and green light fell on the soft forest ground. Not far away, a river rushed.

“Here we are,” cried Zoe. “Our first camp!” She spread her arms. “Room enough for all the tents. The fire pit is up ahead and the Nitsímiihkaa just down there at the end of the path over there. Set everything up at your leisure, put your feet in the cold water and relax.

“The sun doesn’t set for another three hours. By then, though, we should have gathered firewood and porcini mushrooms, if you like. There are some growing up the hillside. They are very nutritious. I’ll show you in a moment. Any other mushrooms you find, please leave them. You have to be careful with mushrooms. Not to worry, I’ll check them before they end up in the pan.”

The Three Investigators set down their backpacks. Jupiter stretched his back and sighed with relief. The campsite was really beautiful. Previous hiking groups had put together a stone circle for the campfire and positioned two tree trunks as benches. There was also some firewood left over.

“Feet in the water sounds good,” said Bob. “Anyone coming?”

All three of them went. The path to the river was a dry creek bed, on the flanks of which the ground bulged up to form a hollow path. The beech trees growing to the left and right formed a natural roof.

It was only fifty metres to the bank. The water rushed over smoothly polished rocks before the riverbed deepened towards the middle. Water eddies created ever-changing patterns, and above the surface, insects danced in the afternoon sun.

“So this is the Nitsímiihkaa,” announced Jupiter, who had of course memorized the complicated name. “Not far from here it flows into Bear’s Prey Lake.”

The river bank was densely overgrown on both sides. The tiny pebble-strewn path they were standing on was the only access to the water. Here too, hikers had made sure that they could sit comfortably on some large flat rocks in the sun.

After Bob had taken off his shoes and dipped his bare feet into the icy water, he felt the force tugging at his ankles. “Be careful, the water current is strong!”

Jupe and Pete also had their feet wet and the First Investigator decided to stay there until his toes had gone numb.

Bob wanted to record another short diary entry and noticed a message on his mobile phone. “Well, it seems we had a bit of reception along the way here.”

“Did you get a message?” asked Pete.

“No, but I got some hits for my search query from this morning.”

“The Bellingham thing?” asked Jupiter. “Let’s hear it!”

“These are only the previews of the hits of my query. I can’t access the full articles themselves because the Internet is gone again.” Bob scrolled through the fragmentary text he was shown, trying to make sense of it. “Listen to this, fellas! There are several newspaper articles talking about a shooting at the port of Bellingham.”

“A shooting?” Pete moved closer.

“Yes. It was only three weeks ago. There was an armed confrontation there in the early hours of the morning. The police arrived. A suspect was arrested, a certain John A., but—”

“John Addington!” Juve exclaimed.

“—The other people involved managed to escape,” Bob continued.

“Anything more?”

“Nothing more. There’s more, of course, but unfortunately I can’t call up the complete articles.”

“A shooting,” Pete muttered. “This Addington guy has been acting so suspiciously all along. Now we know why. He’s a trigger-happy criminal.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” said Bob. “The police eventually let him go. That would mean he’s innocent, wouldn’t it?”

“How can someone involved in a shooting be innocent?” Pete countered.

“I assume that although he is at large, he is still under investigation,” Jupiter reflected. “Remember what he said on the phone—that he was taking a risk by not being at home, even though it’s not like the police are going to check on him every day.”

Jupiter looked thoughtfully at the swirls of water in the river. The sun had moved on by now and the pebble-strewn path was now in the shade. It was getting chilly. The Three Investigators returned to the camp to set up their tent.

Angela and Silent Simon’s tents were already up. The two were nowhere to be seen. They had probably gone mushroom hunting. Zoe was busy sorting the food supplies, while Dylan got the campfire going.

Only Addington did not join in the work. He had not even unpacked his tent, instead, he was sitting on a rock, smoking and leafing through his blue folder. He looked suspiciously at The Three Investigators and absent-mindedly reached for his water bottle to take a sip, but the bottle was empty.

“Did you see the look on his face?” Pete murmured. “—Like we were up to something.”

“Don’t let on, Pete,” Jupiter murmured back.

“I’m not. Now he’s going to the river. He’s slipped the blue folder under his backpack. He thinks we haven’t noticed.”

Jupiter did not hesitate for a second. “Bob, keep watch at the sunken path and warn me when Addington comes back! Pete, you start on the tent so Dylan and Zoe don’t get suspicious!”

Briskly, the First Investigator went to Addington’s backpack. He looked unobtrusively to all sides, lifted it and grabbed the blue folder. In the privacy of the rock, he opened it.

Inside the folder were Addington’s map and some sheets of paper. There were symbols scribbled on the map—a cross marked their camp, and a circle on the shore of Bear’s Prey Lake. The sheets were glossy printouts of satellite photos that also showed the lake shore. There was a spot circled here too. Jupiter looked at it more closely.

At that very next moment, the First Investigator was startled by the call of the Red-bellied Flycatcher. That was the secret call of The Three Investigators that they used to warn

each other inconspicuously in situations like this. That had to be from Bob, warning him that Addington was heading back.

Immediately Jupiter closed the folder, put it back under the backpack and went to Pete. Not a second too soon, for Addington was already coming out of the sunken path. He went straight to his backpack, rummaged out the folder and looked up.

Had Jupiter not put something back properly? The First Investigator concentrated on unfolding their tent.

Bob also returned and joined his friends. "Well, what was in the folder?" he whispered.

Jupiter described what he saw just as quietly. "We know that Addington wants to reach Bear's Prey Lake as soon as possible. Now we also know his exact destination."

"The circled spot," Pete said. "What was there?"

"Something," Jupe answered hesitantly. "I couldn't see it clearly in the photo, but it looked like there was something hidden under the trees on the shore. A boathouse, perhaps? It was impossible to make out."

"Hmm..." Bob glanced at his map. "Theoretically, you could reach the lake in less than an hour. However, Zoe did tell us about a collapsed bridge over the mountain stream. It must be this one. You have to take a detour in any case."

"Fellas, I think Addington has noticed something," Pete murmured. "He's looking funny again."

Suddenly, shouts echoed through the forest. Angela and Silent Simon stumbled into the camp. Simon limped and let Angela support him. He was obviously in pain.

8. The Magical Forest

“What happened?” asked the Second Investigator.

“I tripped and twisted my foot,” Simon moaned.

Pete and Bob relieved Angela and supported Simon up to the tree trunk bench at the fireplace.

Zoe joined them. “Can I have a look?” She made an effort to free Simon from his right shoe.

He flinched and untied his own shoe, slowly and carefully.

“Where does it hurt?”

Simon pointed to his ankle.

“Hmm... nothing swollen. Can you move your foot?”

Simon tried, but twisted his mouth in pain. “I’d rather not.”

Zoe sighed.

“What are we going to do now?” Angela wanted to know. “He can’t go on like this.”

“Oh, come on,” Dylan said contemptuously. “Just grit your teeth. You’re not a sissy, Simon!”

“We’ll wait and see,” Zoe said. “Maybe a little rest might do you some good, Simon. Do you need anything?”

He shook his head.

“Then put your leg up and relax.”

“You can clean the mushrooms,” Angela suggested. “That’s distracting.” The two of them had found two whole bags full of porcini mushrooms the size of their palms.

“We’re going to need firewood soon,” Dylan said, turning to The Three Investigators.

“Hey, guys, you’re not going to duck out of work, are you?”

“Dylan’s right,” Bob said. “We haven’t done anything yet.”

“Let’s go and collect some wood then,” Pete agreed.

What sounded like a matter of five minutes turned out to be unexpectedly difficult. Because of all the rain that had fallen here recently, many of the broken branches and twigs on the forest ground were still damp. Only after half an hour did the boys return with a meagre haul.

Dylan was not amused. “Is that all? What have you been up to? Playing hide and seek?”

Pete wanted to protest, but couldn’t muster the energy. Finally, Dylan made do with the bottle of methylated spirits that Zoe had brought along. In no time, the damp wood caught fire.

Next, the boys brought water in a large pot, while Dylan built a kind of hot plate out of stones. Now they had time to finish setting up their tent and get settled. Meanwhile, Zoe put the rice on and set the pot aside after the water had boiled. The rice would cook by itself.

Addington was the only one who did not join in the preparations. After setting up his tiny tent, he went back to his rock and watched the others work suspiciously. As he did so, he smoked, listened to music through earphones, bobbed his knees and drummed on his thighs with his free hand.

“Hey, mister!” Dylan shouted at him indignantly. “We need more water.”

Addington did not respond. Finally, it was Angela who went to the river.

Evening was falling. As darkness crept closer in the forest, the small group gathered around the fire. Angela scooped the food on plastic plates and distributed them. There was rice with braised onions and mushrooms.

"Mushrooms?" Addington said as he accepted his plate, and screwed up his face.

"Come on," Angela said encouragingly. "At least taste it. There's no need to just eat plain rice."

"I hate mushrooms," Addington said and passed the plate to Pete, who had not received his meal yet. Addington then scooped a serving of rice alone for himself.

The meal was surprisingly tasty—and more filling than Jupiter had thought. Zoe had not promised too much.

While eating, Zoe and Angela made a special effort to create a good atmosphere. The Three Investigators responded, while Simon and Addington remained silent and Dylan only contributed arrogant comments.

Soon the campfire grew quiet. That was just fine with the First Investigator. The day had exhausted him. Even his investigation zeal was on the back burner, and there were no more secrets to elicit from Addington as the man brooded by himself.

Pete was also tired. Besides, the mushrooms were heavy on his stomach. He couldn't even manage his whole plate. "It wouldn't be so bad if there was something else tomorrow," he murmured to Bob. "I didn't really think it was that tasty."

Bob could not complain. He enjoyed staring into the fire and listening to the sounds of the night, the crackling of the wood and the soft rustling of forest creatures in the leaves. In the distance, an owl hooted. For minutes, Bob watched, mesmerized, as the orange sparks from the fire rose into the night sky and died out.

After everyone had finished eating, The Three Investigators collected the plates and cutlery. They had agreed to take over the washing up.

"Clean everything thoroughly," Zoe admonished. "Remember the bears... and make sure the plates don't float away!"

By the light of their flashlights, they went to the river, which shone black and mysterious in the dark. Luckily there was a small natural pool between some rocks on the bank, otherwise the water would have swept the plates right away. Bob dipped them in, rinsed away Pete's food remains and then thoroughly scrubbed out the pot.

When they returned to the campfire, the others were already hiding in their tents.

"I'm going to sleep too," Pete said, yawning heartily. "I'm completely exhausted."

"You?" wondered Jupiter. "For you, today was a relaxed walk, wasn't it?"

"I would have thought so too," Pete grumbled, "but it wasn't. Good night!"

Since the forest ground was damp and the trees were far enough away, Zoe thought it was safe to just let the fire go out instead of putting it out. That way they could light it again more easily the next morning. However, she put another pot of water nearby just to be on the safe side.

When Bob and Jupiter crawled into the tent, they tried to be quiet. It took a while until they had changed in the confines of the tent and were finally in their sleeping bags. All the while, Pete slept as soundly as if he were in a coma.

"Our friend is completely out," Bob whispered in amusement.

"Unusual," Jupiter thought. Then a wave of tiredness overcame him as well. He listened to the river for only a few more minutes before he too fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, Pete got up in a sudden as if something had woken him up. Was that a noise he heard? The Second Investigator listened. Only Bob's and Jupiter's steady breathing, which filled the tent like a pulsating cloud, could be heard. It was not a particularly fragrant cloud.

The air in the tent tickled Pete's palate. He felt sick to his stomach and suddenly had the feeling that he had to leave the tent as quickly as possible before disaster struck. He got out of his sleeping bag, grabbed his jacket, opened the tent door, slipped barefoot into his hiking boots and stumbled outside.

He made it to a nearby tree. There he squatted and threw up. His stomach contents spilled onto the ground in a sour gush... again and again. Pete retched until there was nothing left to retch. Groaning, he rested his sweaty forehead against the rough pine bark, which felt warm and comforting.

What was wrong with him? Had he fallen ill? A stomach ache perhaps? Or was it exhaustion? He had experienced more strenuous things before. This time, he suspected that it had to be the food—probably food poisoning by the mushrooms. They had seemed strange to him from the start. Hopefully he had now got rid of everything that had hit his stomach.

Pete didn't know how long he had been squatting there with his eyes closed, waiting for things to get better. When his breathing calmed down and he opened his eyes, the world was a different place.

The moon had risen. Pete could see the forest—the barked trunks, the treetops, the soft carpet of needles and the stones. Everything around him glowed in fluorescent colours as if someone had painted the surroundings with luminous paint.

Pete blinked. Was this an optical illusion? He hardly dared to move lest he tore the luminous image apart.

"Jupe," he whispered. His voice sounded so loud in his ears as if he had spoken into a megaphone.

Startled, he drew in a breath. This sound also reverberated in his head as if he was in a cathedral. Pete got up and dared to take a step. The soft rustling under his feet sounded like the sound of the sea... like music... like something alive.

As he reached out to a tree, the bark curved towards his fingers. The touch was warm, as if the tree was an animal. Pete saw it breathing, slow and steady and infinitely soothing. He looked around. All the trees were breathing, and they were all in tune. Of course, they were. Why had Pete never noticed this before?

A quiet voice came into his head. Something was wrong here. Trees did not breathe and forests did not glow in the dark. Pete knew that but his senses told him something else.

"Maybe I'm sick," he thought to himself. "Maybe I'm dreaming..." But if it was, then sooner or later, he would wake up. Until then, he wanted to see everything there was to see, hear everything there was to hear, and feel everything there was to feel.

He did not call for Jupiter again, otherwise he might just get a lecture that it was all an illusion. Pete could do without that. A breeze blew through the treetops and the branches trembled. It sounded like the clinking of ice crystals.

The Second Investigator looked around one last time. The camp was quiet. A thin plume of smoke rose from the extinguished campfire. He then decided to go for a little night walk. Nobody would notice if he went off for a while.

Each of his steps cracked and rustled and hissed and rushed. Behind every tree, a new colour surprised him. The fern shimmered in a deep blue. A curious owl stared at him from the branches with fiery red eyes. Pete could even hear the turn of its head.

The forest showed him the way. Everywhere he set foot, the ground was warm and inviting. So Pete climbed up the slope step by step. He felt neither cold nor weak.

Suddenly he heard a loud snort to his right. A jet-black shadow stood on four legs between the trees. It was a bear!

The creature was licking a purple shimmering tree root. Then it lifted its head, growled and took two steps towards Pete. Shimmering waves ran through its fur. It stopped. Its dripping eyes looked uncertain.

Pete was not afraid. It was just a bear—another breathing creature in this forest—like the trees, like himself. He showed the bear his palms as if to say: “I have nothing for you. I don’t carry a gun either. I am harmless.”

The bear took two more steps. It stopped again. Now it was only two arm’s lengths away from Pete. The Second Investigator could feel the warmth radiating from the bear. Pete slowly shook his head. “No, don’t come any closer, that’s it.”

The animal wavered indecisively back and forth. Then it turned away, snorting, walked down the slope towards the camp, looked once more at Pete and finally disappeared between the trees.

“A bear,” Pete thought, “but it went away...”

Jupiter woke up. He saw that Pete was not in his sleeping bag, and the tent door was open. The First Investigator peeled himself out of his sleeping bag, put something on and crawled outside.

The moon bathed the forest in cold, unreal light. All was quiet in the camp. The First Investigator went towards the trees and kept a lookout for Pete. His friend was nowhere to be seen. On his way back to the tent, he realized he had stepped onto something. In the pale moonlight, he took a closer look at the soles of his shoes—yucky and smelly stuff...

“Oh, no,” Jupiter muttered and brushed his shoes off in the leaves. That wasn’t enough, so he made his way to the river. He would probably find Pete there too. When he reached the bank, there was no one there. Jupiter cleaned the soles of his shoes. Then he heard footsteps behind him. “Pete?”

No, it was Bob. “Hi, Jupe. What’s the matter? I woke up—both of you gone. Where’s Pete?”

“I don’t know. He’s missing. I wonder where, and he seems to have become sick.” Jupiter reported his discovery.

“Eww... I guess the mushrooms didn’t agree with him...” Bob said, “but he must be somewhere nearby. Come on, let’s go and have another look.”

They returned to the camp. Still no sign of the Second Investigator.

“Puzzling,” Jupiter muttered. “Where is he?”

“If we call for him, we’ll wake everyone up,” Bob whispered. “What should we do?” Then he heard a cracking sound from the forest.

“That might be him,” Jupiter guessed.

The cracking and shuffling sound approached. It was unusually loud.

“What’s he doing tramping through the undergrowth like that?” muttered Bob uncomprehendingly.

Then a huge figure stepped out from between the trees into the clearing... but it was not Pete.

Bob’s breath caught in his throat. “A bear,” he said. Jupiter next to him also froze.

The huge animal was black and had a grey snout. It raised its head with a snort, looked around and swayed its body back and forth.

A hundred thoughts flashed through Bob's mind at the same time. Hide? But the bear had already seen them. Slowly it trotted into the middle of the camp.

What now? Climb a tree? Bears were good climbers.

Warn the others? They were all in their tents sleeping. What if the bear attacked the tents? What if it trampled them? What if it was hungry? What if it smelled something to eat?

What had Zoe said about encounters with bears? Something about noise?

"It's a bear," Bob heard himself say. It was supposed to be a scream. All that had come out was a croak. Not even the bear had heard it.

Then Bob took a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs: "It's a bear!"

9. Bear Attack!

The bear raised its head and growled.

“A bear!” Jupiter also shouted and hurried to the fireplace. There was the pot with the water for the campfire. Jupiter tipped it out and hit the stones with it. He made as much noise as he could. The bear half turned away and took a few confused steps.

Something was stirring in the tents. Addington stuck his head out. “Are you crazy?”

“Watch out, Mr Addington!” shouted Bob.

“You must want me—” Addington saw the bear and fell silent in shock.

Suddenly everyone was outside. Zoe shouted something that Bob didn’t quite get because Angela was screaming like a banshee.

Dylan held a stick in front of him with both hands like a swordsman. He started waving it around, which the bear didn’t seem to like.

The bear made frantic movements, but because it was already in the middle of the camp, there were people all around it. It opened its mouth and growled again. Dylan backed away, tripped over a root and fell. This interested the bear. It took a few steps towards Dylan. As it did so, it came closer and closer to Angela’s tent.

“Don’t you run away, Dylan!” shouted Zoe.

Dylan didn’t run away, but Angela did. She ran across the camp. The bear jerked around and followed her.

Angela sprinted past the campfire towards the sunken path. Suddenly she stumbled. Her glasses flew off her nose. She managed to catch herself at the last moment.

The bear took up the chase and galloped right into Jupiter’s direction. The First Investigator was overcome by his flight reflex. He jumped up and ran. After only a few steps, it was clear to him—it was a mistake! But now it was too late.

“Jupe!” he heard Bob’s horrified voice before the undergrowth on both sides of the sunken path swallowed all sound except his own panting and the trampling of the bear.

Despite the size difference, a bear could easily outrun an average human. Bears could run at a speed of 48 kilometres per hour, whereas an average human could only manage about half of that—and for the non-athletic Jupiter Jones, that would even be less. Over a distance of fifty metres and with a head start of ten, how long does it take for the bear to catch up with the human? And would the last thing Jupiter Jones did in his life actually be to solve a mental arithmetic problem?

The river came into view. The bear was panting. Jupiter was still holding the pot in his hand. In a wild panic, he hurled it at the bear. He didn’t know whether the pot hit the bear or not, but he knew he was trapped. In front of him was the river, behind him the bear, and to the left and right of the pebble-strewn path, impenetrable undergrowth blocked his way.

Angela was up to her knees in water and screaming.

“Go on!” Jupiter shouted and ran into the river without thinking about it.

He didn’t feel the cold at all. He grabbed Angela and pulled her with him. No sooner had they left the shallow bank behind them than the force of the water swept their feet away.

Jupiter fell, hit his hip hard on a rock and was washed over by an icy wave. He rowed wildly with his arms and tried to stay afloat.

When he finally got his head above the water, he saw the bear behind him on the bank. It was up to its belly in the river, but that was as far as it went. As big as the bear was, the current would carry it along too. Then the First Investigator no longer saw it.

“Help!” Angela swam a little way in front of Jupe. Desperately, she stretched her head and held out her hands to him.

“Stay calm!” Jupiter admonished. “Breathe deeply! Then you can’t go under.” He listened to himself like a stranger. How did he manage to sound so composed while his heart almost burst?

Angela, however, did not seem to hear him at all. In mortal fear, she now tried to claw at Jupiter.

“Hold on to my shoulders from behind! And breathe calmly.” That was what he had learned in the lifeguard course at school.

Fortunately, Angela followed his instructions. Now all he had to do was stay afloat. The river was carrying them away at a speed Jupiter had not thought possible.

Somewhere in the distance something banged. A gunshot! But Jupiter had other worries. “Angela, can you hear me?” he called over the sound of the water. “Angela!”

“Yes, yes, I’m here.”

“Look, we have to get to the opposite bank. I’ll swim and you paddle with your feet, okay? Don’t rush, bit by bit. We don’t have to fight the water. We’ll just drift and swim perpendicular to the current. All right?”

“Yes, good,” she panted.

Jupiter headed for the opposite bank. There they would be safe from the bear. At first, it seemed as if they were not making any progress at all. The current kept pushing them back into the middle of the river.

The First Investigator tried to swim as powerfully as possible. Bit by bit, the river bank came closer. At the same time, the roar of the water flow became louder. Jupiter knew what that meant. He had studied the map sufficiently. They were approaching dangerous rapids!

“Jupe!” shouted Bob in horror after the First Investigator had run into the sunken path—and the bear had gone after him.

Bob took a few steps and stopped. He couldn’t possibly stop the bear but he had to do something! He turned around and looked for help.

Zoe ripped her backpack out of the tent and dumped the contents on the ground. “Where’s the bear spray?”

Dylan had picked himself up and stood there frozen stiff. He still held the stick in his hands.

“Come on!” Bob urged him. “We have to help those two!” But Dylan just stared at him as if in shock.

Where was Addington anyway? And Simon?

Bob’s gaze fell on the still smouldering campfire and he thought of the *Jungle Book*—how the boy Mowgli put the tiger Shere Khan to flight with fire.

Bob snatched the stick from Dylan’s hand, ran to the fireplace and crouched down. Here and there a piece of wood still glowed faintly. Bob blew. A small flame flickered up. It was pitiful. He could only light a candle with it, but he couldn’t chase away a bear.

The methylated spirits! The bottle was behind the tree trunk to keep it away from the fire. Bob soaked the tip of the stick with the liquid and held it into the fire. The flames blazed high. With this torch in his hand, Bob ran into the sunken path.

The black bear was up to its belly in water and looked like a creature from ancient times in the silver light of the moon. There was no sign of Jupiter and Angela. The bear turned towards Bob's flaming torch, stretched its head, showed its teeth and growled fearfully.

"Easy," Bob muttered, not knowing whether he meant the bear or himself. He backed away so as not to block the animal's path to land. Sure enough, it came out of the water and swayed indecisively back and forth.

"Move aside," said an imperious voice.

Addington stood behind Bob in shorts and T-shirt. In one hand, his mobile phone, the light of which he pointed at the bear. In the other hand, a gun.

"Mr Addington! What are you going to do? Don't shoot the bear! If you hurt it, it can go wild."

The bear shook itself as if it had understood Bob's words and trotted out of the water towards them.

Addington unlocked his gun.

"No!"

A shot tore the night apart.

The bear flinched, whirled around and ran into the undergrowth. Addington shone his light after him. Where the bear made its way, the small birch trees trembled. Then nothing moved and the sound of the river drowned out every crackle and rustle. The bear was gone.

"Did you shoot at it?" asked Bob, startled.

"I shot into the air."

"That could have gone very wrong!" Bob was angry. "It could have been aggressive."

"You're welcome."

Bob shook his head. Now was not the time to get upset with Addington. "Jupe!" Bob called across the river. "Juuupe!"

There was no answer.

Addington shone a light on the other bank of the river, but his mobile phone light only made shadows dance.

Zoe came running out of the sunken path. "What happened?"

"The bear is gone," Bob reported. "Mr Addington chased it off with a gunshot. It went that way."

"Why do you have a gun with you, Mr Addington?"

"To defend myself," he replied, "against bears, for example."

"That's not how you defend yourself against bears," Zoe said.

"Obviously it did."

Zoe shook her head in annoyance. "Where are Jupiter and Angela?"

"They must have escaped, but we don't know where to. They are not on the opposite bank, at least not directly opposite."

"They couldn't have run along the river either," Zoe surmised. "The undergrowth is too dense. Only a bear could do that."

Bob nodded. "They must have jumped into the river and drifted away. We can't go looking for them while it's dark. Luckily Jupe is a good swimmer." Bob swallowed and added a little more quietly: "—And I hope Angela is too. Has Pete turned up in the meantime?"

Zoe looked at him questioningly. "Turned up?"

"He's missing... even before the bear came. We didn't see him leave the tent but he must have felt sick. He threw up behind a tree. It was probably the mushrooms."

Zoe frowned. "The mushrooms?"

“I don’t know. In any case, he’s not here.”

“He won’t have walked far if he’s not feeling well. Let’s go back to the camp. Maybe Pete will be back by now.”

However, when they stepped out of the sunken path, the Second Investigator was nowhere to be seen. Silent Simon was also missing.

Only Dylan approached them excitedly. “I was about to come to your rescue but you stole my club, boy.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself, Dylan,” Zoe said. “The bear is gone.”

“I heard the shot. So you listened to my advice?”

“That wasn’t my gun, that was Mr Addington’s.”

“Oh yeah, so you’re armed on a hike?” Dylan looked questioningly at Addington who simply ignored the remark.

“Pete!” shouted Bob. “Peeete! I don’t believe it, he must be stuck somewhere. If the bear got him...”

“Where is Simon, by the way?” asked Zoe. “Maybe they were hiding from the bear together somewhere.” She went to Simon’s tent and pulled up the zip.

Silent Simon sat cross-legged on his sleeping bag and looked anxiously up at Zoe. He had the bear spray in his right hand.

10. Mushrooms and Blueberry Pudding

Jupiter and Angela struggled with the strong water current. The roar of the rapids came closer and closer. Desperately they tried to reach the river bank.

“The river is getting wilder and wilder!” shouted Angela, still clutching Jupiter’s shoulders from behind.

The First Investigator was about to reply, but at that moment he painfully banged his knee against a rock that had been lurking just below the surface of the water. There were now rocks and whirlpools everywhere. The two of them were carried along as if on a slide. Whenever Jupiter tried to hold on, he slipped.

“Swim, Angela!” panted Jupiter. “We have to get out of here! Swim!”

Near the bank, broken tree trunks had become entangled in the rocks in front of them. Now, there was a chance!

The First Investigator put his last bit of strength into the swim and got hold of a branch with his left hand. The wood broke, but by then Jupiter’s right arm was already stretching forward and curling around a slippery tree trunk. The water pulled and tugged at his soaked T-shirt.

Then Angela let go of his shoulders and clung to the trunk as well.

The First Investigator’s grip tightened. “We can pull ourselves up to that rock by the tree!” he shouted over the roar of the river.

The icy water had made him lose feeling in his feet. He hardly knew whether his body was moving the way he wanted it to. Somehow, bit by bit, he came closer to the rock and had finally reached it. Here the current was much weaker.

Another entangled tree trunk brought Jupiter and Angela even closer to the bank. Finally they found a foothold on the stony river bed.

Exhausted, the First Investigator climbed out of the water, helped Angela up the small embankment and then slumped to the ground on a muddy stretch of the river bank. He lay curled up, listening to his burning, gasping breath, thinking he would never be able to move again. Soon, he began to tremble.

“Jupiter?” Angela bent over him and stroked his forehead motherly. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he gasped. “I think so.”

“Watch out for the nettles behind you.”

Jupiter laughed. Nettles? He had just survived a bear attack and a collision with half a dozen rocks. He was Superman and nettles couldn’t hurt him.

Nevertheless, he moved a little to the side, straightened up and pulled his T-shirt over his head. He tried to wring it out. His stiff frozen fingers thwarted him. So he rubbed his upper body with the fabric instead. The cool wind dried the rest.

Angela, who was wearing a T-shirt, left it to wring out on her body. Jupiter handed her his T-shirt and she dried her hair a little with it.

Finally Jupe tightened his aching knee, which was bleeding a little, put his T-shirt over his shoulders, stared at the river and tried to concentrate on the water flowing to get rid of his trembling.

"You saved us," Angela said. "Without you, the rocks would have crushed me sooner or later."

"That's all right. I'm sure you could have done it on your own."

"I am so stupid. I shouldn't have run away. Zoe told us explicitly. I was just so scared when suddenly the bear... honestly, I don't even know what I did. Total blackout. I only came to when I was already knee-deep in water and it swept me off my feet. I'm so sorry."

"We survived, after all."

"—But we could have drowned!" She began to sob.

Jupiter sighed softly. He would have preferred Angela to save the self-reproaches for later or to do without them altogether. He let her sob. He simply had no strength left. For minutes, he just stared at the water and watched the swirling whitecaps.

What was to be done? Nothing at the moment. It was the middle of the night. The moonlight was not bright enough for them to find a way back to camp. Hopefully the others were safe.

Bob held the mobile close to his mouth and spoke quietly into it:

"Zoe looked in the tent, and who's sitting there? Silent Simon, with the bear spray in his hand. At first I thought he was pulling our leg. He was sitting there like a little boy caught with his hand in a biscuit jar."

"Zoe freaked out and confronted him. Simon admitted everything straight away that he had been afraid of such a bear attack all along. That's why he stole the bear spray earlier so he could defend himself in an emergency. After all, he is injured and couldn't just run away like everyone else. The nerve of that man! I really can't figure Simon out... and I don't trust him."

"Well, now everyone is sitting around the campfire and staring into the flames. I'm the only one pacing around the edge of the forest, chatting into my mobile phone and listening. With every crack, I think it's either Pete or Jupe or the bear, but so far it has remained just a crackle. I have already shouted myself hoarse and would like to go and look for them right away. Unfortunately, it's pitch dark. I have to wait for daybreak as I can't do anything before then."

"Jupe is certainly safe. He is a good swimmer and will have saved himself somehow. Angela too, I hope. She has lost her glasses, but it's dark anyway."

"And Pete... It's a complete mystery to me what happened to him. He was already so weird after dinner. He didn't like the mushrooms and didn't even finish his plate. Wait a minute... the mushrooms. I washed his plate in the river. There were two mushrooms on it—small brown ones. I thought they were miniature porcini, but maybe they weren't. Didn't Zoe say it was best to leave all other mushrooms?"

Bob interrupted the recording and went to the slope where the mushrooms were growing. With his mobile phone, he shone the light on the ground and directly found some porcini mushrooms. There were also small brown mushrooms with domed heads growing near the cedars. Bob snapped one of them off, kept it, and continued his recording:

"I think I found the mushroom that looks like those Pete left on his plate. Let's see what Zoe has to say about it. I'm about to... eww... what's that? I walked into something. Something slimy. It smells sweet. Is that... blueberry pudding? How did it get here?"

Bob paused the recording again and switched on his mobile phone light. He had not been mistaken. There was blueberry pudding on the stone. Next to it was a branch with pudding stuck to it as well. It was as if someone had used the branch as a spoon to scrape out a jar.

Bob shone his light on the ground. A little way away, tracks were clearly visible in the soft soil—not human ones, but those of a bear.

Bob followed the trail a little way into the forest and discovered more traces of pudding. This time someone had smeared it on a tree at shoulder height. There wasn't much left, though. Instead, the remains were mixed with what looked like snail slime.

Bob didn't dare go further into the forest, so he followed the trail in the other direction and found pudding remains on a large fern, again mixed with slime, right at the edge of the clearing where the tents were.

Bob looked towards the camp. Zoe, Dylan, Simon and Addington were still sitting around the campfire. Quietly, Bob continued with his diary recording:

“I found more traces of blueberry pudding. Someone smeared it on stones and on plants and used it to make a trail leading from the forest to the camp. And there was something else that I first thought was snail slime, but I now know what it really is—bear saliva!

“The bear licked the stuff up. Someone lured the bear to our camp on purpose! And if that's the case, then maybe the poisonous mushrooms didn't end up on Pete's plate by mistake either. We have a saboteur in camp!”

11. The Lord of the Wilderness

Heart pounding, Bob walked back to the others. Zoe and Dylan looked up, Simon and Addington did not.

“Have you found any trace of Pete?” asked Zoe.

“No... uh... not really...” Bob showed her the small brown mushroom. “Do you know what is this?”

Zoe looked at the mushroom more closely. “Looks like a psilocybin mushroom.”

“A what?” Bob wondered.

“Psilocybin mushroom,” Zoe said. “also known as magic mushroom.”

“Uh-oh!” Bob remarked.

“Be careful with it,” Zoe continued. “I hope you didn’t eat one.”

“I didn’t, but Pete might have.” Bob looked around inconspicuously. None of those present reacted.

“What do you mean?” Zoe asked.

“He didn’t like the mushrooms. When I was washing up, I saw some mushrooms like this on his plate.”

Zoe’s gaze darkened. “That wouldn’t be good... but it would explain Pete’s nausea.”

“Are they poisonous?”

“Yes, but not fatal, don’t worry. Eating it can have other unpleasant side effects apart from nausea and vomiting. Such mushrooms contain naturally occurring psychoactive compounds. This means that they can cause hallucinations. If you ingest them, you may hear and see things that are not there.”

“Things that are not there?”

“Colours and sounds are perceived more intensely, proportions are misjudged and so on. That could explain why Pete left the camp in the middle of the night.”

“—But he did throw up...” Bob said. “I mean, he vomited.”

“The body may have already absorbed some of the active ingredients.”

Mr Addington, who had obviously been listening very carefully, clapped his hands and laughed out loud. “Delightful! Your friend must be having a magical time out there!”

“It’s not funny, Mr Addington,” Zoe said angrily. “If Pete is really running around somewhere hallucinating, who knows what could happen! He might throw himself into a ravine because he thinks he can fly, but I’m wondering something completely different. I did look at the mushrooms that landed in the pot. They were porcini mushrooms and certainly no others. How did that get into Pete’s plate?”

Dylan took a look at the small brown mushroom. “This thing is tiny... you probably missed it.”

Zoe looked at the man for a few seconds before saying: “Yes. Probably.”

The forest glowed and breathed. Pete glowed and breathed with it. With every step, the ground lit up under his feet. He saw every mushroom, every tree, every leaf as if under a microscope. He heard every sound as if through headphones. Leaves blossomed like flowers.

Branches cracked like bones. Above everything, there was a murmur that grew louder and louder.

What was that? Pete took a few steps ahead and peered out of the branches. Aha! It was a stream and the water was of crystalline clarity. He decided to walk along the bank of the stream.

Soon, Pete reached a bridge... or what was left of it. On this side of the stream, the supporting beams were firmly anchored between rocks. On the other, the water had torn them away. He couldn't get any further here. He walked uphill along the stream, the fir trees lined the bank like pillars. It should be strenuous, but Pete felt as if he was floating.

A little further on, the stream was no longer dangerous. It now rippled comfortably in its shallow rocky pool. Pete could cross it.

He stopped at a large rock and stroked its cold, ancient surface. It gave him goose bumps. His gaze fell on a small white stone at his feet, which had probably just fallen from the moon. It was still glowing. Pete picked it up. He could paint with the stone, so he drew a question mark on a rock. Now why did he do that? Well, it did seem extremely logical for him to do so.

And now what? Over to the other side? Or further up? Pete listened into the silence. There was something ahead that drew his attention. So onwards, then. He drew a little arrow next to the question mark on the rock and then continued on his way.

He didn't get far. All at once, the ground sagged away from under Pete's feet. Startled, he jumped back. A hole had opened up where there had been leaves a moment ago. Pete almost fell in, so he took his next steps very carefully and attentively.

Something had changed. The forest, which had seemed so familiar and friendly to him, had changed. It had become cold and forbidding. The ground no longer lit up. The beautiful colours had given way to an icy grey. Panic rose in Pete like bitter gastric juice. He had to get away from here.

Pete sped up. The forest wanted to hold him. Thorny bushes grabbed at him. He fell and then crawled on all fours. Seeking help, he looked up at the trees. The tree trunks grew into the sky as if in fast motion, until the treetops swallowed up the stars and no longer let any moonlight through. The darkness pressed onto him like a blanket of lead.

The Second Investigator summoned up the last of his strength, braced himself and stumbled forward. However, the trees moved closer and closer together. They were like bars in a cage and there was hardly any way out.

Hold on! Now, there was a gap in front! Without hesitation, Pete squeezed through it and found himself in a clearing. In the middle of it stood a warped hut. It grew out of the earth, entwined with ivy and ferns in which fireflies lived. A small light burned behind the only window. Finally, it was salvation!

Pete stumbled through thorny undergrowth and reached the dirty window. He peered through the glass. Inside, the hut was similarly run-down as outside. Grasses and small trees grew out of the gaps between the floorboards. Against the wall was a bed on which a brown blanket lay. In front of it was a table with a flickering candle.

A man was sitting at the table.

Pete saw him in profile. He had long shaggy hair that merged into a shaggy beard. He sat bent over. His hair covered his face. He was writing in a book that lay on the table in front of him.

Lord of the Wilderness... Guardian of Life... Keeper of the Ancient Way. His house was part of the forest, and it grew up from it. The man was an ancient being who had lived here for thousands of years.

What now? Knock on the window? Step through the door? Or was it an offence to disturb the Lord of the Wilderness in his work on the Magical Book of Ancient Wisdom?

Pete stepped indecisively from one foot to the other. As he did so, a branch cracked under his feet and the decision was taken away from him.

The Lord of the Wilderness looked up. His face was like a lump of earth with predator's teeth. His eyes gleamed poison green like a rainforest frog.

Pete backed away. He stumbled and fell.

The door to the hut flew open. The Lord of the Wilderness stomped out. He was a giant. His face melted into the treetops. Only the green eyes shone out of it.

"Who goes there?" the horrible creature growled and came closer with thundering steps.

Pete had been wrong. The hut was not salvation. It was the heart of darkness.

12. Captured!

The fire crackled. Zoe, Simon, Dylan and Addington stared silently into the flames. Bob also watched the flickering, listening for any sound. Every now and then small forest creatures rustled. An owl hooted, but nothing announced the return of Jupiter or Pete... or the bear.

Furtively, Bob kept looking around, searching for some tell-tale signs in the faces of his fellow hikers. Yes, someone had been sabotaging. He had to find out who... but how?

"Dawn is breaking," Dylan said, "finally."

Bob lifted his head. The dark treetops stood out clearly against the sky.

"It's still too dark," Zoe said. "We can't leave for half an hour at the earliest to look for the others."

"Leave?" repeated Simon, "but I can't walk."

"Then stay here," Dylan said.

"What about the bear?"

"You'll drive him away with the spray," Dylan said. "That was your plan anyway. Zoe can stay with you and hold your hand."

However, Zoe was not amused. "Whom I hold hands with, please leave it to me," she said.

Simon lowered his head and said nothing more.

"Bob should stay here too," Dylan continued unapologetically. "This is a man's business. Mr Addington and I are going on a search by ourselves."

However, Addington puffed softly without lifting his head, which could mean anything.

"I'll definitely come with you," Bob said. "After all, it's my friends who are missing. We should fortify ourselves and eat something. Who knows how long we'll have to search. There are plenty of supplies left after all. Did we actually take the pudding from the fridge in the Green House?" Bob knew the question was totally out of the blue and sounded silly. He hoped for a revealing response.

Simon and Addington didn't seem to have heard him at all. Addington had been sitting on a rock smoking the whole time. Only Dylan raised his eyes. "What pudding?" He seemed genuinely confused.

"The one we had for dessert."

"What makes you think of that now?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"We didn't take that," Zoe said.

Suddenly something rang. Everyone flinched. Addington reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. "My alarm clock. I set it before I knew a bear was going to stop me sleeping."

"Why did you want to be up so early?" wondered Zoe.

"To be able to leave in time." Addington rose and went to his tent. In the dim twilight, he cleared it out and began to pack his backpack under the astonished gaze of the others.

"What are you doing, Mr Addington?" asked Zoe as he pulled the poles out of his tent and watched it collapse.

Dylan walked up to him. "What are you up to, Addington?"

"I'm going."

"Where? To the lake?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"If you want to look for our missing persons, it would be better to coordinate with us."

Addington gave a short laugh. "They are your missing persons, not mine."

"What are you doing? You can't walk around here on your own. There's a bear running around out there."

"—But I am armed." Unmoved, Addington continued packing. As he did so, he casually took his gun out of his backpack and slipped it into his waistband. He then went to the box of supplies, opened it and took out a few energy bars. "You can divide the rest of my ration among yourselves." He shouldered his backpack, nodded to the group and casually raised his hand. "Have a good time everyone."

"Not so fast, my friend." Dylan wanted to get in his way, but Zoe intervened.

"Let him go. Mr Addington is a grown man. He can do what he wants."

"There you go." Addington circled Dylan like a tree standing in the way and left the camp for Bear's Prey Lake without looking back.

"You're letting him go just like that?" Dylan asked.

"What do you want me to do? Tie him up?"

"The man is up to something! He thought it was funny that Pete got poisoned. Maybe he put the mushrooms in his food."

"Yes, possibly... but we can't worry about that now. We have to look for Jupiter, Pete and Angela. I can do without someone who isn't the least bit interested in the three of them."

Bob looked around. It was bright enough by now that the black and grey around him had become pale colours. "Zoe's right. We should leave now."

"Who is we?" Silent Simon spoke up anxiously. "There's no way I'm staying alone here."

"Not even if you have the bear spray—"

"No! You are the tour guide. You can't leave me here... otherwise I'll lodge a complaint against you."

Zoe sighed.

"I'll take Bob with me after all," Dylan said. "I was in the Scouts for years and I'm a skilled tracker. We'll find them."

Zoe hesitated and wrestled with herself. "All right, but let me show you something first." She spread her map on the ground and shone her flashlight on it.

"If Pete has gone back, he may have arrived safely at the Green House by now. If not, there is another way out from here, and that is the hiking trail to the lake. It leads over a mountain stream, but the bridge has recently collapsed.

"Downhill from the bridge, the undergrowth is too dense, and there's no way through. So he must have gone uphill, along the stream. After a while, you will come to a shallow part of the river where you can cross safely. You can easily recognize the ford by a large rock right on the bank. Ralph and I have only walked this path twice. You, as a trained tracker, will surely find it."

Bob smirked to himself, while Dylan seemed to have missed Zoe's mockery.

Dylan slapped Bob on the shoulder. "Let's go, young friend! I'll just fill up my water bottle quickly."

When he had gone into the sunken path, Zoe pulled Bob aside. "I hate to let you go alone with him, Bob. I'm only doing this because there's no other way. Simon would go crazy if I didn't. So be vigilant. Dylan is a strange guy."

Bob nodded. "I'll take care of myself."
"Good luck!"

Pete woke up trembling. Had he fallen asleep? Or fainted? He opened his eyes and still saw nothing. His eyelids were covered by something. It felt like a blindfold.

Suddenly his memory returned—the glowing forest that had turned into something evil; the hut; and the Lord of the Wilderness. What had happened afterwards? The giant had rushed towards him and...

An eerie moan sounded. Startled, Pete realized that it had come from his own throat. He wanted to push the blindfold aside but he couldn't. His hands were tied.

As he struggled, someone coughed. Pete froze in fear. He had to see who was there! Bit by bit, the Second Investigator moved his head against the surface he was lying on. The blindfold shifted. Soon it had slid up far enough for him to see underneath.

He was lying on the bed and facing the table. The Lord of the Wilderness was sitting in his chair, now with his back to him. The man's breathing rattled as his broad back rose and fell. He was writing something and had not noticed that Pete had woken up.

The Second Investigator did not move, trying to make out as much as he could in the dim glow of the candle. In one corner lay a dark green army backpack. Next to it were some cans of food. At the end of the table was a small gas cooker. Next to it was a dented pot and a hunting knife.

Pete was so focussed that it took him a moment to notice the obvious—the undergrowth growing out of the ground no longer glowed. The Lord of the Wilderness no longer seemed gigantic to him, but quite normal in size, and his breathing sounded unhealthy and rattling, but the sound no longer reverberated in his head like in a cathedral. Pete's senses were functioning normally again.

Before he could think about what that meant, the Lord of the Wilderness coughed again. He put down his pen and stood up. Heavy footsteps made the floorboards vibrate. Pete heard the door open and slam shut. Outside, footsteps moved away.

The Second Investigator waited a few seconds, then swung his legs off the bed. That is, he wanted to swing it, but his legs were also tied. It only worked on the third attempt.

The bed squeaked. Pete was already out of breath. He felt weak. After a few deep breaths, he stood up with momentum. Just don't fall over now! But his bound legs threw a spanner in the works. He began to stagger. More panic-stricken than deliberate, he hopped forward... then another... and one more... until he finally reached the table. Colourful stars danced before his eyes. He had to sit down! Awkwardly, he plopped down on the chair.

The knife he was after was on the other side of the table and out of reach. First his circulation had to stabilize or he would pass out. Breathe in, breathe out... Breathe in, breathe out...

Pete's gaze fell on the open book. What had seemed to him earlier like a huge and ancient magic book turned out to be a simple notebook on closer inspection. The writing was small but legible. Pete could not turn the pages, so he read what was written on the open page:

... Something else happened today. A boy showed up. He was suddenly standing at the window. I went outside and he collapsed. I couldn't leave him there, so I dragged him inside. He's feverish and asleep. I can't let him see me so I put a blindfold on him in case he wakes up. I hope he doesn't have anything contagious. That would certainly be the

end of me. If I get pneumonia, it's all over. Thomas has to bring me medicine soon or I'll die out here.

There was a crackling and rustling outside. Footsteps were approaching. The Lord of the Wilderness was coming back!

Pete stood up. It was too late for the shackles. Even if he had managed to cut them—he was far too weak to fight back against the man. Hastily he wobbled back to the bed as quietly as he could, dropped onto it and tried to lie down in the same position as before. At the same time, he moved his face several times against the mattress to push the blindfold back to cover his eyes. He only half succeeded.

The door opened and the man entered the hut. For a moment, he was stationary such that Pete could see his face through the fabric. His eyes had a yellowish sheen and lay deep in their sockets. His cheeks were sunken, his beard was shaggy and streaked with grey. He suppressed a cough and stepped out of Pete's field of vision.

The Second Investigator pretended to be asleep and forced his breathing to calm. Had the man noticed that he had been up? Was he just standing in front of him grinning and laughing at him? Drops of sweat beaded from Pete's forehead.

A chair was moved. The Second Investigator guessed what this meant—the stranger no longer sat with his back to him, but had the bed in view from now on. Now Pete could not even move the blindfold without blowing his cover. He suddenly panicked and had the feeling that he would not be able to lie motionless for three seconds. His nose itched. Sweat was pouring. His left arm slowly fell asleep. He would have liked to scream.

The pen scratched on the paper again. That calmed Pete down a little. He forced himself to concentrate on the essentials—who was this man? Pete had a hunch. The notebook had the same paper as the note Bob had found in the bird house at the Green House. Both pieces of writing spoke of a Thomas, and there were cans of ravioli on the floor. So the Lord of the Wilderness had to be Ernie—the Ernie who needed medicine; the Ernie who had thrown rubbish in the forest; and the Ernie who had marched from Capricorn Peak to Two Creeks to leave a message for Thomas.

But who was Ernie? And how did all this information help Pete get out of here?

13. The Hiding Place in the Willows

“Are you sure this is the right way? There’s no way through here. It’s all full of undergrowth and all full of thorns. I can’t even see because my glasses are gone. My legs are all scratched up. We’ll never get back to camp like this.”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. Angela had been getting on his nerves ever since they left twenty minutes ago. She whined because they were hardly making any progress, and she was right about that. There was no path, only impenetrable wilderness. They had neither a machete with them nor were they properly dressed to march through the fields of waist-high nettles and thorny brambles. Three times they had already made great detours, only to be dismayed to find themselves back at the river bank and that they had not even gone more than fifty metres.

The First Investigator’s plan to walk back along the river towards the camp faltered especially since he still had no idea how to continue. If they made it to the river bank opposite the camp, what then? They would not be able to cross the Nitsíimihkaa, and there might not be a suitable spot further upstream either.

“The scratches on my legs are already swelling. Who knows, maybe I have a blackberry allergy. If I get an allergic shock now...”

Jupiter stopped. “You’re right, Angela. It’s no use.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along. So what do we do now?”

“Turn around. Not far from here the Nitsíimihkaa flows into the lake. We can swim through the lake and go back on the other side. It would take us maybe another hour to get to the camp.”

In good spirits, they made their way downstream and were lucky. The river bank became increasingly stony and thus easier to walk on.

Finally, the river flowed into Bear’s Prey Lake. The lake stretched out before them, smooth as glass and dark as lead. The sun announced itself in golden streaks of cloud over the forested horizon. Two geese flew up. Not far away, a fish jumped and rippled the water.

Jupiter looked over to the opposite shore. There, not far from the mouth of the Nitsíimihkaa, Addington had marked a spot on his satellite images. From here, however, Jupiter could not see anything suspicious.

“We’d better not waste any time,” he said and got into the water.

Angela followed him and gasped. “Ice cold! I’ll never make it across.”

“Of course you can do it—just like earlier. Come on!”

Angela overcame herself and dived in completely. In calm strokes they swam off. They also felt a current on the lake, but not as strong as that on the river.

Bear’s Prey Lake was a flowing body of water. It was fed by the Nitsíimihkaa and flowed down a waterfall some distance away. This caused the two of them to drift further and further away.

Ten minutes later, they reached the other shore. After the icy water, the morning air seemed downright warm to Jupiter.

“I’m going behind the trees for a moment to change,” Angela said, presumably meaning that she wanted to take off her T-shirt, wring it out and put it back on. She left the

embankment and went into the forest.

Jupiter poured the water out of his shoes and enjoyed the absolute silence for a moment. It was really just a moment. After only a few seconds, he heard footsteps. Was Angela back already? Jupiter peeked out from behind the tree trunk.

Thirty metres away, Mr Addington was walking through the forest. Jupiter's heart leapt. They were saved! He was about to jump up and call out but then he noticed that Addington didn't seem to be looking out for anyone. On the contrary, he marched straight across the footpath, with earphones on and glancing at his blue folder. In his waistband, the First Investigator spotted a gun.

Jupiter's investigator instinct awoke and he stayed under cover. Addington had apparently broken away from the group to get to his destination as quickly as possible. This was the opportunity to find out what his secret mission was. Jupiter had to warn Angela.

The First Investigator let the man pass and then crept crouched in Angela's direction. She was already coming towards him. Jupiter immediately put his index finger to his lips.

"The bear?" whispered Angela, startled.

"No," Jupiter whispered back. "Addington has turned up."

Angela sighed with relief and took a deep breath.

Jupiter sprang forward and put the flat of his hand over her mouth. "Not a sound, Angela!"

She looked at him in shock. "—But isn't he looking for us?"

"No, he's not."

"That's nonsense, Jupiter, what else could he—"

"Please, Angela, I can't explain it to you now, but Addington is not to be trusted."

"What do you mean?"

"Pete, Bob and I suspect that he is up to something. We just don't know what yet, and he's armed!"

"Armed?"

Jupiter nodded.

"I don't understand what you're talking about at all. You think John is up to something?"

Jupiter flinched but did not reply.

Angela continued: "He might be a bit weird, but that's not what this is about at all. We need his help!"

"No, we don't," Jupe insisted. "I had a good look of the hiking trail from the map. We can go back on our own. Please trust me, Angela. There's the trail over there. Follow it and you'll get to the camp without any problems."

"—But there's a collapsed bridge."

"You will find a detour around it, I am quite sure."

"I can't even find the nearest tree without my glasses!"

"You'll be fine."

"And what about you?"

"I'll find out what Addington is up to. As soon as I know, I'll come back. I'm sure it'll be quick. I'll probably catch up with you soon."

"What about the bear?"

"Bears are nocturnal and sleep during the day," Jupiter lied. "So it's peacefully dreaming right now." That was sheer hogwash, but Jupiter had to get rid of Angela right now if he didn't want to lose Addington.

"All right." She nodded stoutly. "I'll go. Good luck."

"You too."

Together they made their way to the nearby hiking trail. Angela turned to the left, Jupiter to the right. After a few minutes, Jupe managed to get closer to Addington, but kept his distance so as not to be seen.

The man kept glancing towards the lake. Finally he stopped. The shore here was thick with willows, their lush greenery blocking the view of the water. Addington pushed his way through the undergrowth and soon disappeared between the trees.

Jupe had to get closer. He followed the path a little further to a place where mainly ferns and mosses grew. Silently, the First Investigator reached the lake shore.

"There's only one thing to do," he muttered and got into the icy water once more. He had almost got used to it and only gasped very briefly.

As quietly as possible, he swam to the trees where Addington had disappeared. The willow branches reached up to the surface of the water. As Jupiter came closer, he noticed that several branches and twigs had been tied together with string to make the natural privacy screen even tighter. Someone had tried to hide something from prying eyes. Only here and there did it shimmer brightly from behind the dense greenery.

Finally, he was close enough to be able to push aside the curtain of branches and see what was hidden behind.

The sun rose and groped through the damp air with pale fingers of light.

For fifteen minutes, Bob and Dylan had been marching along the footpath towards the lake, keeping a lookout for Pete, Jupiter and Angela. Rather, Bob was on the lookout. Dylan confined himself to explaining eloquently to Bob that he hadn't actually been afraid of the bear the previous night, that he had only not followed immediately because Bob had been so stupid as to snatch the club away from him. After three minutes, Bob stopped listening and just let Dylan ramble on.

At regular intervals, Bob called for his friends, but there was no answer. Only the birds made a great spectacle.

The path rose more and more and the slope became steeper and steeper until it went almost vertically into the depths on their right. Far below them, the churning Nitsíimihkaa shimmered.

They walked a little way inland and finally reached the mountain stream that blocked their way. It was not very wide, but because of the steep terrain it seemed impassable at first glance.

"There's the bridge," Bob said, "or what's left of it."

The water had washed free the anchoring of two posts in the ground on the opposite bank, whereupon the bridge had half collapsed. Now only a few beams and planks hovered over the stream.

Off the path to the left, Bob noticed a trail. "That must be the alternative route. Let's go."

"Not so fast, Bob," Dylan said. "We can make it to the other side from here. Then we'll get to the lake much quicker."

"How? The bridge is broken, isn't it?"

"Not completely. We'll get over there somehow. Addington did it, after all."

"Addington? What makes you think he was here?"

Dylan pointed to the muddy ground. "Footprints. Those are his silly biker boots. and the trail continues over there. I used to be a Scout, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but Addington was just very reckless. That doesn't mean we have to be. We're really better off taking the route Zoe told us."

“Don’t be a sissy. This is just a little stream! Now listen to me—we don’t know where Pete is but we have an idea where Jupiter and Angela could be, namely somewhere down by the river or the lake. The sooner we reach the other side, the better. Come on now!”

Bob had no idea how he was going to make it to the other side of the stream. More importantly, he did not trust Dylan. The sports teacher argued so vehemently against all reason, as if he wanted to stop Bob from taking the alternative route at all costs.

Wait a minute—was that perhaps the point? Was it possibly all about the hiking group not getting too close to the secret of this forest? Was that why all the sabotage had taken place? If Dylan was indeed behind the trip hazard in the Green House, the poisonous mushrooms and the bear attack, then perhaps this was the moment for Bob to find out.

Finally, Dylan lost patience with Bob’s hesitation. The sports teacher shook the remaining bridge pillars, gripped decisively and, clasp his hands above his head around a beam, took a big step into the stream.

“What are you doing?” cried Bob, startled.

“Just follow me!” Dylan insisted. On tiptoe, he balanced on slippery rocks as the water washed over his shoes. Soon the water reached his ankle, then his calf. With his hands, he shimmied forward as if on a climbing scaffold... until all at once the beam gave way. Dylan slipped.

“Look out!” Bob cried.

Dylan was in danger of falling into the depths. At the last second, he managed to claw his way into the herbaceous subsoil on the opposite bank and pull himself out of the water.

Gasping and shaking, he stood up and laughed nervously. “That was... a bit close.”

“You almost got swept away!” shouted Bob indignantly. “Did you see how steep it is here? You could have broken your neck!”

“Oh, nonsense. It’s not that steep. Wait, I’ll look for a branch. I can throw it to you and pull you over... or maybe you can find one on your side.”

Bob shook his head vigorously. “I certainly won’t follow your way. It’s life-threatening.”

“—But I can hold you if you slip.”

“No.”

“You can’t walk through the forest alone, boy,” Dylan implored him. “Come on, I’ll help you.”

“No,” Bob repeated firmly. “That was unnecessary recklessness. I’ll take the detour, and I’ll meet you at the lake.”

“But—”

Bob turned and trudged uphill through the ferns.

“Bob, there’s a bear running around. We’d better go in pairs. Don’t do anything stupid now! Bob!”

Bob waved without looking back at Dylan. After only a few metres, he no longer heard him. Bob angrily pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket.

“Bob’s Travel Diary...”

“Dylan is such an idiot! We just narrowly escaped disaster. The collapsed bridge that Zoe had warned us about, Dylan thought that as an old Scout swashbuckler he could somehow fly over it. He nearly fell into the water and then wanted me to follow him. He practically implored me. I went the other way anyway and am now on my own. But what I wonder is—did Dylan really care about me—or did he just want to stop me from continuing on the trail?”

For fifteen minutes, Bob walked steeply uphill before the terrain flattened out. A large rock emerged. The mountain stream just rippled leisurely here. This had to be the spot Zoe had been talking about. Bob stopped and took a deep gulp from his water bottle. Then he put his hands to his mouth and shouted at the top of his lungs: “Where are you, Peeete!”

14. The *Hummingbird*

The sun had risen. It was slowly getting warmer in the forest hut. Pete was still lying on the bed and pretending to sleep.

The Lord of the Wilderness had finished his paperwork and was breathing heavily. Had he fallen asleep at the table? Or was he brooding?

Suddenly a distant call rang through the forest. The Lord of the Wilderness startled. Pete held his breath. Had someone called his name?

“Where are you, Peeete!” That was Bob’s voice!

The Second Investigator hesitated for a moment or two. Then he pushed the blindfold aside with a quick movement of his head, straightened up with a flourish and took a deep breath.

Pete no longer had the chance to scream. The Lord of the Wilderness was with him in a second and pressed his heavy, sweaty hand over Pete’s mouth. “Nothing doing, boy, keep your mouth shut!”

Pete looked into the man’s pale blue eyes, which sparkled under his bushy eyebrows. His breath smelled sour. The Second Investigator tried to bite his hand and a resounding slap hit him. It took him two seconds to recover from it—time enough for the Lord of the Wilderness to reach for a roll of duct tape and tear off a thick strip. Pete squirmed, but he was still bound.

“Help!” he still managed to call out. His voice had hardly any strength. Then the tape landed on his mouth.

Bob listened. The birds had gone silent for a moment. Now they were chirping again. Nothing else stirred. Only the wind stroked softly through the trees.

“Peeete!”

No answer.

Bob decided to go across the stream, which should be really easy to cross at this point. Sighing, he reached down to take his water bottle which he had placed on a rock—and froze.

Someone had scratched a question mark on the rock. Bob had not noticed it earlier as it was faint. Now, when he looked closer, at the top of the question mark was a small arrow pointing up the stream.

Pete or Jupiter had been here! The stone that had served as a scratching tool lay on the ground next to the rock. Bob picked it up and scratched a second and clearer question mark on the rock to be on the safe side.

He looked in the direction the arrow was pointing. There were some plants bent over and trampled on. A little further, something shimmered between branches and dense foliage. Was that... a hut?

Cautiously, he stepped closer. He did not notice a hole in the ground covered with branches and leaves. His next step went nowhere.

It had been a feat to bend and tie together the branches and twigs of trees in such a way that they formed such a large hiding place right on the lake shore—and big it had to be, because it

hid a seaplane.

Fascinated, Jupiter looked at the sweeping floats with which the plane 'stood' on the water, the white fuselage and the blunt wings that reached up to the curtain of willow branches.

Someone had tied the plane to the tree trunk with a rope to prevent it from drifting away. The rope creaked softly. Under the wings, the marking could be read in a sequence of letters and numbers, as well as on the side fuselage. Next to it, someone had written a name in somewhat awkward letters: '*Hummingbird*'.

Mr Addington was nowhere to be seen, but the door to the pilot's cockpit was open.

Suddenly there was a rumbling inside the plane. Someone groaned in pain. Then there was silence. What had happened? Had Addington hurt himself in there?

Jupiter listened and for minutes heard only the soft splashing of water and the creaking of rope. The First Investigator slid to one of the two floats and pushed himself upwards. He was able to hold on to the struts leading to the wing and shimmy to the door.

Cautiously, he looked inside the plane. Behind the two pilot seats was a small dark hold. Addington lay on the floor with his face turned away and did not move.

Jupiter got into the cockpit and climbed over the seats to the back. It was very cramped in the hold. When the First Investigator bent over to look at Addington's face, he saw a triumphant smile. Only now did he discover the gun in Addington's hand.

"Hello, Jupiter. That's what I thought."

The First Investigator slumped his shoulders. "You have set a trap for me."

"I heard splashing and saw you through the window." Addington scrambled to his feet, without taking his eyes off Jupiter. "So you and your friends were after me all along. You three rascals! I didn't want to believe it at first, but your buddy Bob overheard me on the phone yesterday, didn't he? And then he pretended to listen to music. Clever... and one of you was going through my stuff." He held up the blue folder. "Did you also lure the bear to the camp?"

"I have certainly noticed that you feel watched and followed, Mr Addington, but whatever assumptions you are making, you are wrong."

"Ha! As if you weren't spying on me."

"I admit that we have been paying increased attention to you."

Addington laughed. "Increased attention? Who hired you?"

"No one."

"Look, kid, I realize you're not the masterminds, but I want a name. Who's behind this thing at the harbour?"

"I don't know."

"But you know what I'm talking about. So, out with it!"

"I know what you're talking about because Bob overheard your phone conversation, but I don't know what exactly happened at the harbour."

Something feverish flickered in Addington's eyes. "The gold is mine, understand? Who betrayed me? You tell me everything you know right now!" The gun in Addington's hand trembled.

Jupiter began to feel scared. The man was unpredictable at this moment.

"Come on, out with it!"

"Mr Addington, I think there has been a misunderstanding. I assure you, we are up to no harm."

"Then why are you sneaking after me?"

“Okay, I’ll tell you everything I know,” Jupe said. “We’re just here for a hike, but since we arrived in Two Creeks the day before yesterday, some strange things have happened that have caught our attention. Bill Greyfield, a resident of Two Creeks, told us of strange happenings around Capricorn Peak for which he blamed Ralph Sanders.”

“What kind of events?”

“Someone seems to be up to some mischief up here. Mr Greyfield thinks it’s poaching, but maybe it’s something else altogether. Then there was the car alarm at night and Ralph’s fall from the stairs. It seemed strange to us, like someone was trying to sabotage the tour.

“And then you—you wanted to hire Ralph as a private guide. You reluctantly joined the group and made mysterious phone calls involving half a million something, gold and a hummingbird. Our interest was piqued... and yes, it’s true, we kept an eye on you from then on. We wanted to get to the bottom of your secret.”

Addington laughed out. “As private investigators or what?”

“That’s right. We have a small investigation business back home in California and have been able to solve a number of tricky cases in the past.”

Addington laughed out again. “Good story, but you can’t fool me. You lured the bear too, didn’t you?”

“Now listen to me, Mr Addington. The bear chased me and I only managed to save myself in the river at the last second. I almost drowned in the strong water current, and you are saying that I lured the bear? Is that your—”

A sound made Jupiter pause. Something scraped and scratched across the outer hull of the plane. The willow branches wiped across the windscreen and it grew brighter outside the small windows.

“What’s going on?” asked Addington in alarm. “Why are we moving? The *Hummingbird* is tied up, isn’t it?”

“I’ll go and see,” Jupiter decided.

“Nothing doing!” Addington pushed him aside and climbed forward between the seats, bumping his head and cursing.

He leaned out through the door and looked around. Slowly the plane moved away from its hiding place under the willows and glided out onto the lake. “We’re really drifting! But there’s no one out there. Have you untied us?”

“Certainly not.”

“Your friend Bob? Or Pete? Was it all an act, that he supposedly went missing? Did he secretly go in search of this plane? Did he recover the gold? Answer me!”

“I promise you that we will continue our conversation, but first we should get to safety. As you know, this lake drains over a waterfall. The further we drift out onto the lake, the stronger the current becomes. Maybe we can pull the plane back with our combined forces.”

“Pull the plane? Are you crazy?” Addington turned pale.

“Do you want it to plunge down the waterfall?”

“I don’t care about that at all. It’s not my plane. The thing is I can’t swim!”

“You can’t? Then we should leave the plane immediately. I can get you safely ashore. You just hold on to my shoulders and—”

“You’ll let me drown!”

“This is nonsense, Mr Addington. We should hurry up before we drift out further.”

Addington didn’t seem to be listening at all. He began to examine the cockpit controls. Everywhere were buttons and levers and gauges and switches. “How do you start this thing?”

“Excuse me?”

“We can start the engine and steer it back to shore,” Addington said. “I’ve changed my mind. I want to save the plane as there may be some clues here that will tell me where the gold is.”

“Are you a pilot?”

“Do I look like one?”

“Then I consider this approach highly—”

Addington pressed a button. Nothing happened. He pressed another, pulled a lever and flipped a switch.

“What are you doing?” Jupiter climbed over the backrest, sat down in the co-pilot’s seat and undid everything Addington had done.

“Hands off!”

“You don’t even know what you’re doing.”

“Do you?”

“I’m just undoing everything you did.”

“We certainly won’t get the engine running like that.”

“—But also not by simply pressing random buttons.”

“You have a better idea?” Addington almost shouted. He was close to panic.

“Yes, just do me a favour and leave the controls alone.” Jupiter looked around. It was incredibly cramped. Was there a glove compartment here? No. A side pocket in the door? No.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for... ah, here!” Under the seat was a small plastic folder with papers. Underneath was a manual for the aircraft. Jupiter leafed through to the chapter on take-off preparations.

Addington was horrified. “You want to fly this thing using an instruction manual?”

“I don’t want to fly at all. I want to start the engine and steer us back to shore—like what you said earlier.” Jupiter looked out of the window. “Darn, the current is getting stronger. We’re moving faster and faster. We have about five to ten minutes left, I estimate.”

“It’s not going to work out!”

“Not if you keep distracting me.”

Addington actually kept his mouth shut and lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. Jupiter was pretty sure that was not a good idea in the cockpit of a seaplane, but he said nothing. They had no time to lose.

Four minutes later, he said: “Okay, let’s give it a try.”

“It’s about time. I can already see the waterfall. Get on with it!”

“Hold on... here we go.” Jupiter reached across Addington’s lap and pulled a red lever. “That should be the fuel supply... and since there’s no brake or handbrake on a seaplane, you don’t really have to do anything at first except push the start button.”

Triumphantly, Jupiter pressed a big red button diagonally below the control stick.

Nothing happened.

He pressed again.

Horror was written all over Addington’s face. “Are you kidding me?”

Just then, a wave rocked the plane. “These are the first rapids,” Addington cried. “All full of rocks here. Ahead is the waterfall!”

“I must have missed something,” Jupiter muttered and flipped back through the manual.

“Take your time...” Addington’s voice cracked.

A second wave caught the plane and it began to turn. Now the nose of the plane pointed directly at the waterfall... somewhat signalling the end of their lives, should Jupiter not succeed in getting that cursed engine going.

15. More on the Bellingham Incident

“Do something!” shouted Addington, pushing buttons uncontrollably.

“I beg you, Mr Addington, don’t do that! Who knows what the consequences will be if you—”

Suddenly lights flashed and needles on speedometer-like gauges shot up.

Addington paused. “What have I done?”

“The master switch! You hit the master switch, which is there for anything to happen at all.” Jupiter sighed with relief. “Sorry, I had forgotten about that, but well done, Mr Addington. It should work now.”

The First Investigator pressed the start button again and with a powerful rattle and roar, the plane came to life. A tremor was felt as the propeller began to turn.

“You did it!” Addington shouted with excitement. “Now we’ve got to steer this thing around!” He depressed the rudder pedals himself to move the water rudders on the floats. However, the plane was still drifting towards the waterfall.

“Not enough thrust!” Jupiter yelled. “Increase power on the throttle!”

Addington tried. The engine howled, and the plane moved. It glided to the right. Infinitely slowly it turned to face away from the waterfall. Shortly afterwards, it moved away in a wide arc out of the strongest current. From now on, the *Hummingbird* was very easy to steer.

Within a few minutes, Addington had guided the seaplane to a calmer part of the lake. As there were no brakes on a seaplane, he steered it alongside the shore. The approach was a little rough, as they had too much momentum. With an ugly crunch, the floats scraped over the rocks near the shore, but Addington and Jupiter didn’t care.

When the plane stopped moving, the First Investigator flicked the master switch to turn everything off. They both climbed out of the plane, balanced themselves on floats before getting back on shore.

Jupiter moored the plane and dropped exhausted into the tall grass on the embankment. “I’m exhausted.”

Addington laughed with relief. “Investigators, eh?” he asked, panting, as if he had done a sprint. “What do you know about me?”

“You are John Addington of Addington & Sons in Seattle,” Jupiter began.

“How do you know my first name?” Mr Addington said. “I haven’t told anyone in the hiking group, not even Ralph.”

Jupiter frowned. “A little routine research on your person, and the shooting incident at the port of Bellingham.”

“So, from newspaper reports, I suppose,” Addington said. “Then you already know everything.”

“Not really,” Jupe replied. “I only managed to read the report headlines.”

“Let me tell you this—I’m not the bad guy there.”

The First Investigator straightened up. “I’ll believe you when you tell me your story. What are you doing here? How did you know about this plane? Why are you looking for it?”

“I was looking for it because I was robbed... three weeks ago at the port.”

“So what’s your story?” Jupiter continued to probe.

“All right... from the beginning then.” Addington lit a cigarette and began to narrate: “Three weeks ago, I was transporting something very valuable from an island off Bellingham to the mainland to sell in the city.”

“Gold?” Jupiter guessed.

“Right—gold bars. They belonged to my grandfather. He’s the founder of Addington & Sons. You might have heard of it. My grandfather was quite a headstrong man and liked to play by his own rules. I inherited that from him. For example, he didn’t have much faith in banks, so he invested part of his fortune in gold secretly.”

“—As I know, private gold ownership was banned in the United States for several decades for economic reasons.”

Addington nodded. “That’s why he hid it. My grandfather passed away many years ago, but no one knew about the gold. I only learned about it from some old documents about a month ago. It was in a stash on a small island off the coast of Bellingham, where my family has had a weekend home for decades. It was a welcome surprise, I can tell you.”

“—Because you have money problems,” Jupiter guessed. He noticed Addington’s suspicious look. “You’ve made the headlines often enough with your maladjusted lifestyle and shouldn’t be surprised that I come to that conclusion.”

Addington relaxed a little. “I guess you’re right. I wanted to turn the gold bars into cash and solve some... urgent problems. So I made an appointment with a dealer, loaded the gold into my little boat and took it to Bellingham.

“In the harbour the robbery happened. Two masked guys appeared out of nowhere. They managed to overpower and tie me up on the pier and blindfold me. Then they calmly cleaned out my boat.”

“Who were they?”

“As I said, they were masked.”

“But surely you have an idea. The robbery was no coincidence. Someone must have known about the gold transport.”

Addington raised his eyebrows and emitted a large cloud of smoke. “Well, I don’t know how to put it... There are quite a few people who come to mind. I haven’t only made friends in life, you know. For one thing, there are my greedy siblings who threw me off the company board, and a couple of old acquaintances from the music scene with whom things didn’t go so well...

“I had to run up debts and, well... let’s put it this way... there are a few candidates who might have had an eye on me. It’s complicated. I will take care of that issue when I find the gold.”

“All right, back to the robbery... How did it happen?”

“I picked up the gold in the middle of the night. I didn’t want anyone to know else I would be at the mercy of crooks, of course... well, almost, because I fought back. They didn’t expect that.

“I managed to fray the rope shackle on the rusty edge of a freight container. The robbers were already hauling the two crates of gold to their seaplane, but a hundred and twenty kilos is not so easy to lug. I immediately called the police. Then there was a shoot-out.”

“With the police? Were they on the spot so quickly?”

“No. It was a shoot-out with me. With such a cargo on board, of course I had my gun, but it was on the boat. When the robbers were not looking, I managed to grab it. Then, I couldn’t wait for the police, so I confronted them. The guys took cover. They were also armed. We shot at each other between the warehouses and containers. It was like in a western.

“Finally the police came but by then it was too late. The seaplane was already moving out to sea, but I continued to shoot at it.”

“Did you hit it?”

“Yes. I’ll get to that in a minute. The *Hummingbird* took off. Suddenly there were policemen everywhere, but those idiots pointed their guns at me! Like I was the bad guy!”

“Understandable. How could they have known what was going on? Not to mention that you could have easily hurt someone or worse.”

“I was only defending myself, and for that I was arrested,” Addington said.

“Was there no one else at the harbour?” Jupe asked. “Witnesses, perhaps?”

“In fact, there was. A witness turned up—a worker on his way to his job at the port, who claimed to have seen everything. I don’t believe he saw anything, that idiot. It was dark and even I could not be sure of all the stupid things he said.”

“—But you did shoot,” Jupiter remarked.

Addington gave him a nasty look. “I wanted to save my gold! However, the police only half-believed me and told me to not leave Washington State while the investigation was ongoing. And then there was the press. They besieged me for days, but I didn’t tell those vultures anything. If I had, there would be thousands of people looking for the gold right now. Well, thank you very much.”

“How did you know where to look?”

“The police did search for the seaplane. The registration identified the owner as a certain Ernie Botnick. I don’t know the name. Probably the man was only hired as a pilot. The police were able to follow the flight path east but over Montana, the trail was lost. The APB had gone out to all the official water landing sites, without success. So the *Hummingbird* had to have landed unnoticed in the wilderness... and I know why.” Addington pointed to a bullet hole in the fuselage of the plane. “—Because I hit the fuel tank. Normally a plane like that has a longer range but because it lost fuel, the *Hummingbird* had to make an emergency landing somewhere in Montana.”

“And how did you know where exactly?”

“I didn’t know, but it’s a seaplane. So I looked at all the lakes in Montana that were big enough to land on and lonely enough that no one would notice the landing.”

He tossed Jupiter the blue folder with the printouts of the satellite images. Then he remembered: “Oh, you’ve seen these before.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. How did you narrow down the locations?”

“By comparison,” Addington replied. “I was comparing older images with recent ones and came across this.” He showed the First Investigator the circled spot. Now that Jupiter knew what it was. He recognized the vague shape of a plane under the canopy. “That wasn’t in the older images.”

“So you spotted the plane on the satellite images and then went looking for someone to lead you to this lake,” Jupe asked.

“I would have wanted to search for it alone, but I felt it was risky,” Addington explained. “My assistant George suggested that I hire a guide, and I agreed. He did the booking, but somehow, there was a misunderstanding with Ralph Sanders. I could have done it better myself... but after all, what’s an assistant for? Actually, he manages my band.”

“Okay, so you have reluctantly joined the hiking group and now you have finally reached your destination. So where is the gold?”

Addington looked at the plane and sighed. “Gone.”

“—But that was to be expected, wasn’t it? If you take off with a plane full of gold and then have to make an emergency landing and hide the plane, you still take the gold with

you... or hide it somewhere.”

“A bar like that weighs more than twelve kilos. You can’t transport more than one of them on foot over a long distance. I thought I’d find a clue on the plane... but so far, there’s nothing.”

“There are clues,” Jupiter contradicted and unconsciously began to pinch his lower lip. “In fact, lots of clues, the longer I think about it. First, there’s the pilot’s name—Ernie Botnick. Then, on the day before yesterday at the Green House, we discovered a bird house being used as a dead letterbox. Inside was a secret message from Ernie to a man named Thomas.”

Addington listened up. “Really?”

“Ernie asked for a supply of medicine and something to scare bears away. After Ralph’s fall from the stairs, Pete checked the bird house—the message was gone. That probably means that Thomas had taken it.”

“Who is Thomas?”

“That is the big question. Probably he is our saboteur—the man who set the trip hazard on the stairs of the Green House so as to prevent the hike from taking place, and who possibly also lured the bear to our camp so we wouldn’t get too close to his secret—which is the gold stash.”

“—And someone must have untied the plane earlier,” Addington added, “but there’s no Thomas in our hiking group.”

“He might have registered under a false name.”

Addington frowned. “Whoever it was... if he wanted to sabotage the hike so we wouldn’t find the gold... then yes, that means the hiking route goes right past the hiding place.”

“The changed walking route...” Jupiter’s eyes flashed. “Hmm... if I may present my theory... Ernie, the pilot, has been hiding in the mountains since the emergency landing. We can speculate that he is guarding the gold. Maybe he’s also afraid of the police looking for him and wants to wait until the dust settles.

“That’s not a problem at first, but then Ralph and Zoe changed the hiking route because of the bridge collapse. Now there is a danger that the hiking group will discover Ernie’s hiding place... and Thomas, his crony and thus presumably the second man involved in the Bellingham robbery, wants to prevent that.”

“Then let’s hope no one accidentally stumbles across it, because I know from the police that Ernie is no stranger to them. He’s done time for a couple of crimes. Ernie Botnick is not to be trifled with.”

16. Ernie's Account

Bob fell. At least that's what he thought for a split-second when his step suddenly went into the void. However, it was not a bottomless abyss into which he fell, only a hole about a metre deep. He managed to catch himself with his hands but his shin scraped painfully along the edge.

"Ouch!" He gritted his teeth and palpated his leg. Fortunately, only a bit of skin was scraped. Bob climbed out of the hole and wiped the leaves and twigs that had stuck on his trousers.

Who had dug this trap? And for whom? Rabbits? Bears? Or people? Had it been this hole into which Bill Greyfield had fallen and sprained his foot?

Bob looked at the hut that stood a little way away in the small clearing. Now he noticed that the surrounding plants were not growing out of the ground, but had been deliberately draped there. Someone had tried to hide the hut from prying eyes although it had only been half successful.

Bob would find answers in the hut, he was sure of it. The closer he got, the more shoe prints he discovered leading to and from the door.

"Pete?" Bob called out another time.

Had there been a noise? He went to the window. Inside there was a bed, a table, a chair, a backpack and some camping things. Someone had made himself at home here, but this someone was apparently not in at the moment. When Bob opened the door, it creaked audibly.

Suddenly a hand darted out from behind the door, grabbed Bob by the sleeve and dragged him into the hut. Caught off guard, Bob stumbled into the middle of the room, turned around and looked into the panic-stricken face of his friend.

"Pete!"

The Second Investigator was tied up. His mouth was taped shut. A man with a wild beard and an even wilder look held him from behind. His right hand clenched around a large hunting knife.

"Keep quiet and nothing will happen to him," the man gasped, suppressing a cough.

"Who are you?" Bob asked.

"Nobody. Don't look at me. Look away, I said!" The knife in the man's hand trembled.

Bob jerked and turned his head away. He was now looking out of the window. "I mean you no harm... but let my friend go."

"I can't."

"What are you going to do? You can't hold him forever."

The man seemed to be struggling with himself. Sweat stood on his forehead. His breathing came in gasps. "You will betray me. You will call the police and then—" He coughed—so hard that he had to lean forward convulsively.

As he did so, his grip loosened. Pete broke free and made a few leaps to Bob, who immediately tore the tape from his mouth and stood protectively in front of him.

When the man stood up, panting, sweaty and with watery eyes, they saw the desperation in his face. He groped for the door, wrenched it open and stumbled outside. Bob threw the

door shut and prevented it from opening with the back of the chair.

Pete exhaled audibly. "I'm so glad you're here!"

"Wait, I'll free you." Bob pulled the tape from his friend's wrists and ankles. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so... to a certain extent. Where is Jupe?"

"I don't know. Long story. What are you doing here?"

"A long story too."

"Who is this guy?"

"Ernie."

"Ernie?"

"Later. I want to know if he's really gone first." Pete hobbled to the window and looked out. "He's walking towards the edge of the forest. No, he's more like staggering. Oh, my goodness!"

"What is it?" Bob also came to the window. Out of the woods stepped two figures—John Addington... and Jupiter Jones!

At that second, they spotted Ernie. He too had noticed the two newcomers and froze.

"We have to get out!" urged Pete.

Bob opened the door. Ernie heard the door creak, whirled around and saw Bob and Pete come out of the hut.

"Bob! Pete!" cried Jupe, relieved.

"Get out of here!" shouted Ernie. Without intending to, the others had practically surrounded Ernie in the clearing. "Get out of here or I'll—"

Again what he was about to say was lost in a fit of coughing. This time the fit did not stop. Ernie coughed and coughed, went to his knees and fell to the side.

Jupiter and Addington came closer.

"Careful, he has a knife!" warned Bob.

They reached Ernie at the same time. He had indeed drawn the knife, but he did not threaten them with it. Instead, he pointed the trembling blade at himself.

"Leave me," he gasped. "It's over."

Addington stepped towards Ernie.

"Watch out!" shouted Jupiter, but by then Addington had already wrestled the knife away from the man with one swift movement.

Ernie offered no more resistance. He collapsed and lay gasping. His forehead glowed and was wet with sweat.

"Bob! Pete!" repeated Jupiter. "Am I glad to see you."

"Likewise, Jupe," Bob said. "What about Angela?"

"She's fine, don't worry. Is that Ernie Botnick?"

"Yes, but how do you know that?" Pete wondered. "Never mind, explain later. We should get him inside first. He's sick."

With combined forces, they carried the man into the hut and laid him on the bed. He lapsed into a half-awake, half-fainting state, but his breathing slowly calmed down. Pete moistened a dirty T-shirt lying in the corner with water and gently placed it on Ernie's forehead.

"Okay," Bob said. "Who's going to start?" He looked questioningly at Jupiter.

Jupe looked at Pete.

Pete looked at Ernie Botnick. "Him," said the Second Investigator. "I want to know his story first."

"I don't think he'll be able to talk anytime soon," Addington said.

“He doesn’t have to.” Pete took the notebook from the table. “This is his diary. I’ve already read parts of it. I’m curious to read the rest.” He turned back to the first page and read aloud.

12th May

I don’t know where to start. I have had the most dramatic days of my life. I was betrayed and slid into the middle of a catastrophe. I’m writing everything down now because I have no idea what will happen to me. Maybe I’ll die up here on the mountain and then no one will know who I am.

First things first... My name is Ernie Botnick. I am a man who has made a lot of wrong decisions in his life—wrong decisions that landed me in prison for a few years. When I got out, I wanted to change my life. I am an amateur pilot and own a small seaplane—the Hummingbird. I had hoped to somehow earn a living from flying. It didn’t really work out and I had money problems all the time.

Two weeks ago, Thomas called me. We had spent some time together in prison. He asked me for a favour. I had never really felt comfortable with him and I didn’t want to have anything to do with crooked businesses anymore. However I needed money and he assured me that everything would be harmless and safe. I was to pick up a cargo in my seaplane at the port of Bellingham and fly to Wyoming. That was all, so I agreed.

Two days ago, on 10th May, Thomas was waiting for me at the harbour at night. He pulled me to a hiding place and explained to me that soon a small boat would dock with a lot of gold on board. We would rob the boatman, steal the gold and I was to take it to safety by plane. I freaked out. I had agreed to a transport flight, not a robbery. I wanted to get out. We argued until the boat came. Then Thomas came under pressure. He promised me half the loot if I went along with his plan. I had understood that there was a lot of gold. Finally, I caved in and agreed.

Thomas had taken care of everything. He even had a gun for me. We masked ourselves and overpowered and tied up the man after he had come ashore.

The gold was in wooden crates. We were carrying them from the boat across the pier to the plane when the guy somehow broke free and shot at us. We took cover and shot back. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, as I just wanted to make it safely to the Hummingbird and get away. That’s when the police showed up, stormed the harbour and everything went haywire. Thomas had suddenly disappeared. I saved myself in the plane, steered out of the harbour and took off.

Thomas had arranged for me to fly to a small private airfield in Wyoming. Not knowing what else to do, I stuck to the plan. However, at some point, I noticed that the tank was emptying faster than it should. A bullet had hit it. Over Montana, the situation was too delicate to continue flying. I had to make an emergency landing on a lonely mountain lake. Then I hid the plane on the shore.

Yesterday, I found a hiking trail and went to the nearest town, Two Creeks. My mobile phone battery was long dead, so I went into a diner. The owner let me use her phone and I was finally able to contact Thomas. He had just managed to flee from the police, but injured himself in the process. However, something else had happened.

It is difficult for me to write it down, but I have to face the truth. One of the police officers died in the shooting. Since then, they have been searching for his killer—me—because the fatal bullet came from my gun, which I had lost in the harbour during the escape.

I shot and killed a person. I cannot forgive myself for that, but I just do not know what to do next.

Thomas implored me to hide. Shocked, I returned to the forest and found an old abandoned ranger's hut a little way from the lake. It was no longer in use, and here I am now. There is a bed, a table, and forgotten junk. I can get fresh water from a small mountain stream. But what good is it? I can't stay here forever, can I?

I found this little notebook. It only has a few pages left but they are enough for me to tell my story. However, they are not enough to record what is going on inside me. I killed a man. Ten thousand pages would not be enough.

15th May

I went to Two Creeks again and managed to call Thomas a second time. He still cannot move much as he has not recovered from his injury. He again asked me to remain in the hut and meanwhile, he had arranged for someone to provide me with foodstuff. I was to pick them up tomorrow in a garden shed, and I could leave him messages in a bird house there. Thomas would keep me informed of the situation and advised me to avoid meeting anybody in the meantime.

After the call, I wanted to turn myself in to the police. On the way, my courage ran out. In the end, I am a miserable coward. On the other hand, would it change anything if they convicted me and locked me up? I can't go back to prison. I just can't.

18th May

It is raining heavily and a bear has appeared. I saw it yesterday and today. It was sniffing around my empty ravioli cans that were lying outside. Luckily they were no longer in the hut, otherwise the bear might have smashed the door. I will throw the empty cans a bit further away next time. In the meantime, I need more supplies and have started a list for Thomas.

22nd May

How should I go on? I can't stay here in this hut forever. Thomas sent me a message saying that the authorities are looking for me everywhere, and he is also afraid of being watched by the police. I have to be patient. In the meantime, I have fallen ill. No surprise there in this weather. It rained for days. The little stream was raging and destroyed a bridge.

Meanwhile, the bear is becoming a problem. Today it suddenly appeared right in front of me as I was coming back from fetching water. I managed to dodge it and get back into the hut. Maybe I can keep the bear away if I dig a hole—something like a trap. I don't have many more options up here.

24th May

I give up on the trap. My only digging tool is the back of a broken folding chair that was in the hut. I have blisters on my hands and the hole is only a metre deep. I'll camouflage it anyway, but I don't think the bear will be impressed. Meanwhile, my cough is getting worse.

26th May

I was almost found. Hikers passed by the hut. It was pure coincidence that they didn't see my bear trap or my tracks. I will try to hide the hut from view, as I did with the plane at the lake.

27th May

Someone walked into my trap. I didn't see it, but the camouflage on top was damaged. I don't think it was the bear. I can't go on like this. Sooner or later, I will be found. I can't leave the hut, but because of the bear, I need a safer place. Besides, my cough is getting worse and worse. My lungs are rattling. Things are not good for me right now but I have to get through this somehow. I have to, or is this my just punishment?

1st June

I've had a fever for two days and sleep most of the day. Would I even make it another time to the garden shed without collapsing? Have I missed the time to save my own life?

Something else happened today. A boy showed up. He was suddenly standing at the window. I went outside and he collapsed. I couldn't leave him there, so I dragged him inside. He's feverish and asleep. I can't let him see me so I put a blindfold on him in case he wakes up. I hope he doesn't have anything contagious. That would certainly be the end of me. If I get pneumonia, it's all over. Thomas has to bring me medicine soon or I'll die out here. Now that this boy has found me, maybe this is the final sign—a kick in the butt that I need to turn myself in to the police.

I need medical help, and I am choking on my guilt. I am desperate. What am I going to do?

Pete lowered the notebook and noticed that Ernie Botnick had regained consciousness in the meantime. He had listened to Pete's narration in silence.

"Now it's finally out," Ernie whispered.

Bob gave Ernie a sympathetic look. "So that's how it was..."

"No..." Jupiter countered, looking slowly around. "It's not like that at all."

17. Who is Thomas?

“What do you mean, Jupe?” Pete asked in surprise.

“Mr Botnick’s account does not match what Mr Addington told me,” the First Investigator said. “We were talking about the shooting at the harbour. His version differs from Mr Botnick’s account in one significant respect.”

Addington grinned and turned to Ernie Botnick. “I’m John Addington—the man you robbed, and also the one who shot at your plane. What Jupiter is trying to say is everything happened exactly as you wrote it—apart from the fact that no one died in the shooting.”

Ernie’s gaze flickered. “Excuse me?”

“The police came, a witness testified, I was temporarily arrested, a search was launched for your plane, but no one was shot, nor was anyone killed. It’s simply not true that someone had died.”

Ernie suppressed a cough, “—But Thomas said—”

“Thomas lied,” Jupiter said, “and I’m beginning to realize why. Yes, of course. It all makes sense now. The gold is not here at all, is it?”

“Here? What do you mean? No, of course not.”

“Wait a minute.” Addington looked from Jupiter to Ernie and back again in alarm. “Why isn’t it here?”

The First Investigator replied: “It was never loaded onto the plane. I assume you yourself prevented that, Mr Addington, by opening fire, or did you actually see the crates being taken aboard the *Hummingbird*?”

“No,” Addington admitted, “but it was no longer at the port. I assumed that it must have been loaded onto the plane after all.”

“No,” Ernie said. “There was no time for that. When the police came, I just wanted to take off as quickly as possible.”

Jupiter nodded slowly, pinching his lower lip. “As I said, it all makes sense. Thomas lied, and he did it so he wouldn’t have to share the loot with you, Mr Botnick.”

“The police believe the gold was loaded aboard the plane. The only person who could clear up that mistake is you, but you’ve been led to believe you shot and killed someone, so you’re hiding in the woods. While Thomas pretended to care for your well-being and want to save you from greater harm, he was in fact pursuing the exact opposite goal—to get rid of you... and if I judge your state of health correctly, he almost succeeded.”

Ernie’s eyes slowly filled with tears as he understood more and more what had happened in the last few weeks. “I... I didn’t kill someone?”

“No,” affirmed the First Investigator. “You did not.”

The man heaved a deep sigh. It took a moment before he could speak again. “I will turn myself in to the police and admit everything I have done,” he promised, “if I make it down this mountain.”

“We’ll help you,” Jupiter promised. “I have one more question, though. This Thomas... the man who betrayed you—what does he look like?”

Half an hour later, The Three Investigators, John Addington and Ernie Botnick set off.

With the help of the remaining duct tape, they had constructed a stretcher using wood from the chair and other items in the hut. This enabled them to transport Ernie, who would never have made the descent on his own legs. The journey down was sweaty and not without danger on the steep and slippery stages. Ernie soon fell into a feverish sleep, from which his threatening cough tore him away again and again.

On the way, the boys had enough time to tell each other their adventures in great detail. Bob and Pete relived Jupiter's dramatic struggle to escape the raging river. Jupiter, Bob and Mr Addington marvelled at Pete's nocturnal wanderings. Bob explained to Pete that the psychoactive mushrooms had been responsible for his dream-like state, the effects of which had fortunately worn off after a few hours.

"—And I thought there was something wrong with me," said the Second Investigator with relief. "It was as if I was travelling on a foreign planet, and this planet was floating in my own head—which was as big as an aeroplane hangar."

Bob raised his eyebrows.

"I can't explain it any better than that," Pete concluded. "It was something between dreaming and being awake."

"At least you had the presence of mind to leave a question mark on the rock," Bob said. "That must have been some kind of reflex—not normal either, if you ask me, but it was useful, otherwise I wouldn't have found you."

Jupiter added: "When I realized we were looking for something that must be close to the new hiking route, Mr Addington and I took a closer look at the satellite photos and discovered the old ranger's hut."

Ernie woke up from his sleep, coughing. "Pete," he gasped softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you prisoner, but I didn't know what to do. I was... I just didn't know..."

"It's all right, Mr Botnick. Get some rest. We'll sort all this out later."

Ernie nodded weakly and was asleep again shortly afterwards.

Half an hour later, they reached the camp. Zoe, Simon and Angela were sitting around the campfire, which had almost burnt out. Dylan was nowhere to be seen.

Zoe jumped up and ran towards them. "Thank goodness! You are safe and sound! I was just going to look for you! What happened? Who is that man?"

"It's a long story," Jupiter replied. "We need some water for our patient, and some food for us. I'm starving."

Without asking any more questions, Zoe fetched water from the river while Ernie was carried the last few metres into camp. They put down the stretcher and caught their breath.

"Angela," Jupiter said. "Good to see you. So you found your way back without your glasses."

"Yes." Angela adjusted the frame on her nose. The glasses had become a little crooked and the left lens was broken. "I found the detour, but... what happened? Who's that? And where have you been, Pete?"

"One at a time," Jupiter asked. "Where is Dylan?"

"He hasn't come back yet," Angela replied. "He's probably still looking for us."

"Okay. He'll be back at some point."

"What do we do when he comes back?" Simon asked.

"Mr Botnick has a high fever and needs medical attention," Juve replied. "We have to get him to Two Creeks. The hike is over."

A sigh of relief escaped Simon.

"I could call Dr Williams ahead to meet us at the Green House," Angela suggested. "I'll also ask him to bring a crutch for Simon."

"That's a very good idea, Angela," Jupiter said, "but please wait a moment. I just want to clear something up quickly while we wait for Dylan."

They gathered around the campfire and Jupiter told them in calm and concise words who Ernie Botnick was and why Mr Addington had taken part in the hike. Zoe, Simon and Angela could hardly stop marvelling.

"The hike was overshadowed by a series of incidents—Ralph's fall from the stairs; Pete's disappearance; the bear's attack; and the drifting of the plane that almost took me and Mr Addington down the waterfall. None of it was a coincidence. Someone wanted to sabotage the hike so no one would find Mr Botnick and discover that he didn't have Mr Addington's gold with him at all."

"Who?" asked Zoe tensely.

"A man called Thomas," Jupe replied. "Based on the circumstantial evidence we had gathered, we began to suspect that this Thomas was a participant in our hiking group under a different name."

Zoe slapped her hand over her mouth, Angela listened with her jaw clenched.

Simon gasped in fright and shouted: "It wasn't me!"

"Right. It wasn't you... because Mr Botnick was able to describe Thomas's appearance to us... and the description exactly fits—"

"—George." Addington snorted angrily. "George, my assistant. We've been friends for years, but I had no idea of his past or that he had changed his name.

"I told him about my gold find on the island and my plans to bring it back. Now I realized he betrayed me—not only did he planned the robbery, but he was there in person! I still can't believe it, but now I recall when I saw him the very next time after the robbery, he had hurt his ankle—which, as we now know, happened during his escape from the cops.

"According to Ernie, he managed to contact George by phone twice, after which George sent someone to take care of Ernie. Now that I know, George is in for a surprise when I get back to Seattle. I can't wait." Grimly, Addington threw his cigarette butt into the last embers of the campfire and watched it burn.

"I don't understand," Zoe said. "Thomas... or George... isn't even here. Then how can he be responsible for the bear or the plane?"

"He was injured, but even if he was not, he couldn't show up here in person, or he and Mr Addington would have met," Bob explained, "so he sent someone."

"I confess that at first we did suspect you, Simon," Jupiter continued.

"It wasn't me!" Simon affirmed again.

"Yes... and after we knew that Thomas was not here at all, we widened the circle of suspects and established that there is another person who could be responsible for the acts of sabotage."

Zoe swallowed.

"Perhaps you can enlighten us," Jupiter suggested, turning his head, "Angela?"

18. "It Wasn't Me!"

"Me?" Angela laughed. "Are you kidding?"

"Not at all. Let's summarize... You were easily able to install the trip hazard on the stairs. You were also able to set off the alarm from Ralph's car without having to leave the house to do so. You see, your room at the Green House faces out the front. I assume you threw something at the car from your room window—maybe the basketball that was outside."

"That's nonsense!" Angela countered. "The bathroom also has a window facing the front, and that was accessible to everyone."

"I haven't finished yet," Jupiter continued unperturbed. "You also handed Mr Addington his plate last night, which he then gave to Pete. You could have easily mixed the psychedelic mushrooms into the food. Lastly, you were still around when I discovered the hiding place under the willows. So you returned shortly afterwards and loosened the plane's moorings."

"Look... anyone could have just easily dropped the mushrooms in the pot," Angela argued. "—And the plane? Maybe the strong water current loosened the knots... or it could be Dylan who is still missing, as you may have noticed."

"That is possible, Angela," Jupiter said coolly, "but beyond that, you have betrayed yourself."

Angela pursed her mouth. "I'm curious about that."

"After we swam across the lake and I told you of my suspicions about Mr Addington, you asked sceptically if 'John is up to something'? But at that time, no one but me and my two friends knew his first name."

"He told me."

"I did not," Addington clarified. "I never told anyone here my first name, not even Ralph, nor did I put my first name in my registration for this hike."

"I..." Angela fell silent.

"There's only one particular incident we haven't had confirmation," Bob took over. "Did you use blueberry pudding to lure the bear here, and if so, why did you run away from it?"

It happened so fast that no one could react. Angela jumped up from the tree trunk and snatched the gun from Mr Addington's waistband.

Simon and Zoe let out a short cry at the same time.

"Put the gun down," the First Investigator asked. "I don't think you want to shoot anyone."

"Stay seated, all of you!" Angela ordered the group. "Don't anyone of you move, I'm warning you!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Bob.

"I quit this sick job! Bears, rivers, brambles—next time Thomas can do his dirty work by himself! I'm out of here, and nobody follows me, understand?" Step by step, she walked backwards, her eyes firmly on the group.

Pete was the first to sense some movement among the trees behind Angela and his eyes snapped open. Then the bushes trembled, and a grey furry snout pushed the branches aside. The bear was back!

As the bear staggered into the clearing, Angela whirled around and let out a cry of horror. The animal jerked in fright.

Angela was frozen. The bear was about four metres away from her and was slowly swaying its head back and forth. Then it trotted towards a tent—Angela’s tent. It was open. The bear first stuck its head inside and then squashed the tent like a house of cards. It shook the tarpaulin off its bulky body, rummaged around in the scraps and finally found what it wanted—a plastic cup of blueberry pudding. Grunting contentedly, it licked the contents of the cup.

Fascinated, everyone watched as the big animal finished its meal and then turned to Angela.

“Angela,” Jupiter said calmly. “It’s not going to attack you. Just stay calm.”

However, the bear came closer and closer. Slowly, Angela raised the gun.

Then Pete stood up, and walked very gently towards the bear. “Hello, big guy. Remember me?”

The bear snorted and sniffed in Pete’s direction.

“You’ve got what you wanted... and there’s nothing left for you here,” Pete said calmly. “You should go back now.”

The animal tilted its head and made a growling sound.

“No, there really isn’t any more food. All eaten up. Goodbye.”

The bear snorted briefly before turning and trotting away. At the edge of the forest, it turned around once more and looked at Pete from its dripping eyes. Its gaze was unfathomable. The next moment, it disappeared between the trees.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Mr Addington had meanwhile stepped up to Angela without her noticing. He grabbed the gun from her hand. Angela offered no resistance.

Bob walked over to the Second Investigator and tapped him on the shoulder. “Is that your secret superpower now? That you can talk to bears?”

“Yes,” said Pete, “since that dose of mushrooms, I can also fly.”

Suddenly there was a rustling in the undergrowth. Everyone turned their heads but it was not the bear returning. It was Dylan. He looked around and saw the gun in Addington’s hand and Ernie Botnick asleep on the stretcher. He shook his head uncomprehendingly. “What’s going on here?”

On the way back, The Three Investigators, Dylan and Mr Addington took turns to carry Ernie on the stretcher and help Silent Simon along. Zoe was tasked to guard Angela with Addington’s gun to make sure she didn’t escape.

They had just paused on the way to the valley and were sitting on a grassed area resting. Meanwhile, Bob continued his recording:

“Our sports teacher was amazed. It took a while to explain everything to him. In my mind, I apologized to him, after all I was convinced for a while that he was the bad guy. He’s still an opinionated idiot, of course, but I’m still glad he’s here. We need his muscles to carry Ernie to Two Creeks.

“Oh, well, we’re now halfway to the Green House. The backpacks remained at the camp. We’ll get them in the next few days, otherwise Mr Greyfield will be upset again about the rubbish that the hikers leave lying around in the forest.

“Angela has now come clean. She thought it would be a great obstacle to the hike if the bear came to the camp. After she had finished laying the decoy trail, she forgot to put the pudding back in her bear-proof container because Pete had unknowingly startled her

on his way to throw up at the tree. Eventually, when the bear came at her, she lost her nerve and just ran. Nothing she did was properly thought out.

“Angela also cleared up the air on several related matters. On the night of the robbery, Thomas had planted another one of his accomplices to be a lookout at the port. When things turned awry, that guy couldn’t do anything against the large police turn-out. Instead, he came forth as a witness who then gave false statements leading to the eventual arrest of Mr Addington.

“Talking about Mr Addington, what was of most interest to him was when Angela revealed where the gold had gone to. When the police showed up, Thomas unceremoniously pushed the two crates into the water. As he injured his ankle escaping from the police, he could not retrieve the loot, so he had to buy time and lie to Ernie to keep him from coming out to reveal all. To do that, Thomas sent Angela to a town near Two Creeks. It was she who decided on the bird house as a dead letterbox to communicate with Ernie without having to reveal herself. She also supplied Ernie with foodstuff.

“When Mr Addington wanted to go on the hike to find the plane, Thomas also registered Angela and assigned her to create all sorts of diversions to prevent Mr Addington, or anyone for that matter, from finding Ernie.

“Thomas’s recovery took longer than expected, but he is now ready to recover the gold as soon as Angela returns from her mission at Two Creeks. Had she been successful, who knows what would have happened to Ernie.

“Hmm... am I forgetting anything?”

“Yes...” John Addington had overheard Bob and he sat down with The Three Investigators. “You can tell your phone that I am thankful to the help given to me by three very clever investigators.”

“You’re welcome,” Jupiter said.

“So you’re going to get the gold back?” asked Pete.

“Yes, of course,” Mr Addington said, “but I can’t swim or dive, so I will need help to do so.”

“Actually, we’re licensed divers as well,” Jupiter quickly said. “In fact, we should give you our business card now...” He searched his pockets. “Uh... unfortunately, I believe if I can find one with me, it’ll be very wet and soggy. What about you two?” He turned to Pete and Bob.

“Wait a minute!” Bob said. He searched through the images on his mobile phone and found a softcopy version of their card:



“Send it to me,” Addington said.

“Sure, as soon as I get reception again,” Bob promised, “and then I’ll get to read the press reports about the robbery. Anyway, I need to complete my report, and hopefully it will help the police convict those responsible.”

John Addington’s eyes widened in shock. “It wasn’t me!”

Their shared laughter caused Silent Simon, who was sitting a little distance away, to look questioningly at them, but they did not let him in on it.